Rolling Stone
UK
DECEMBER/JANUARY 2023
ISSUE 008

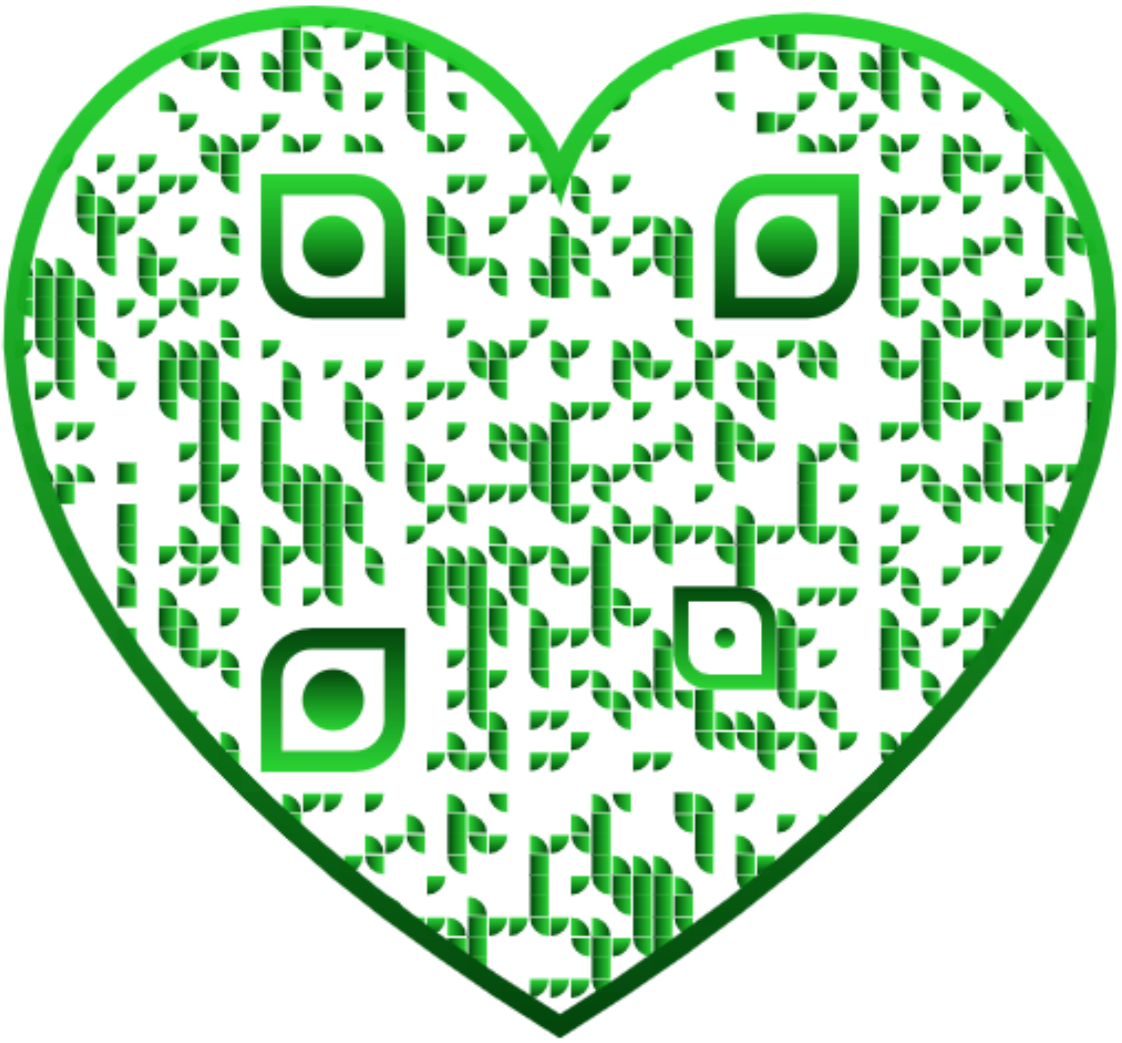
THE AWARDS ISSUE

YUNGBLUD

INSIDE THE CHAOTIC LIFE OF A DIVISIVE GEN Z ROCK STAR

+

LITTLE SIMZ
BREE RUNWAY
GROOVE ARMADA
ARCTIC MONKEYS
OZZY OSBOURNE
ROBERT PLANT
MAYA HAWKE
SAM RYDER
ELIZA ROSE
DOECHII



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LITTLE SIMZ

THE UNSTOPPABLE RISE OF BRITAIN'S REIGNING STAR

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RS
ISSUE 008

"Imagine walking down the street and everyone either loves you or thinks you're a fucking c*nt"

Yungblud

YUNGBLUD WEARS BLAZER BY 8 BY YOOX, LEATHER TROUSERS BY ALTU AT MATCHESFASHION, SOCKS BY FALKE, SHOES BY UNDERGROUND, JEWELLERY BY CHROME HEARTS, SUNGLASSES BY SALVATORE FERRAGAMO

KOSMAS PAVLOS

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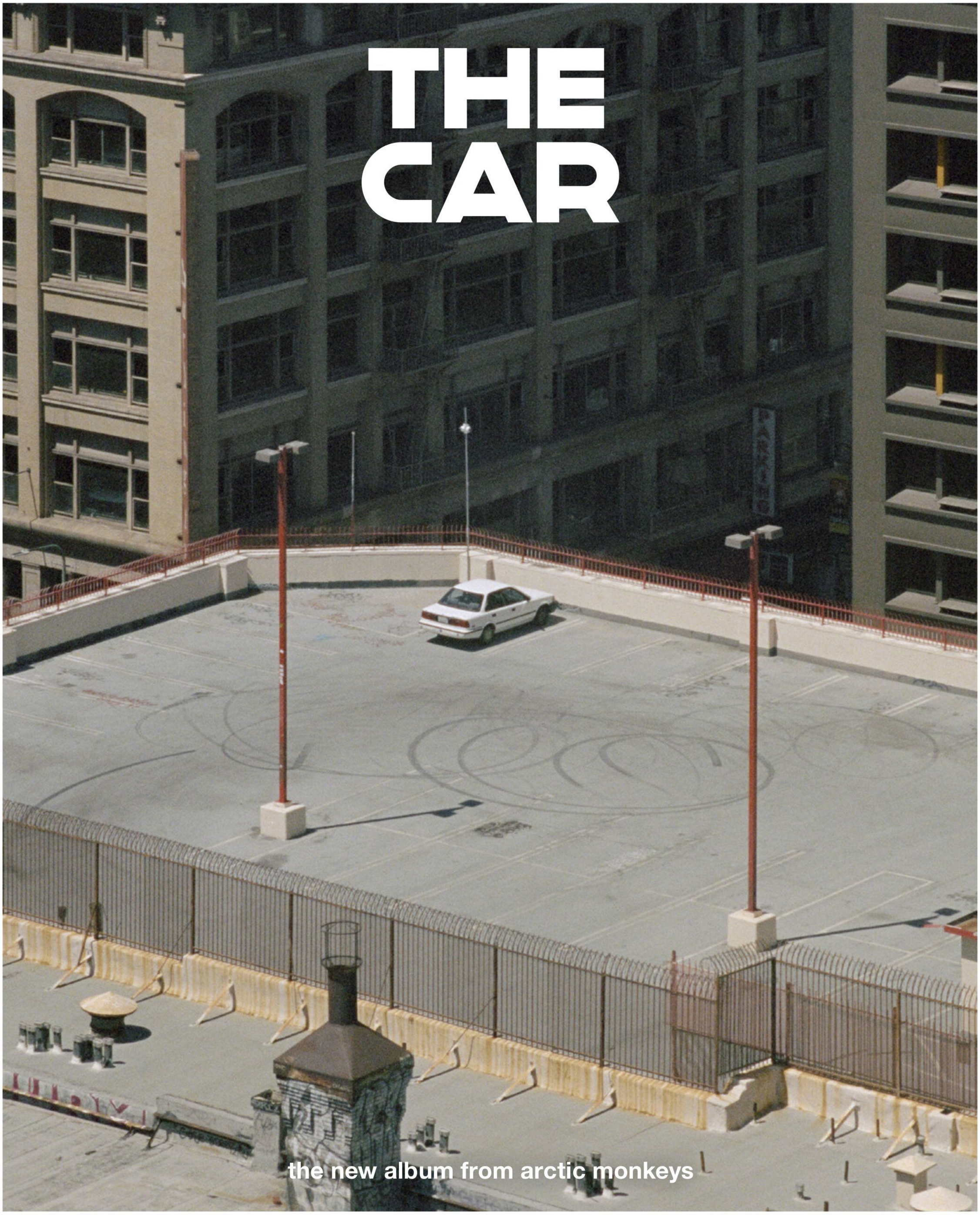
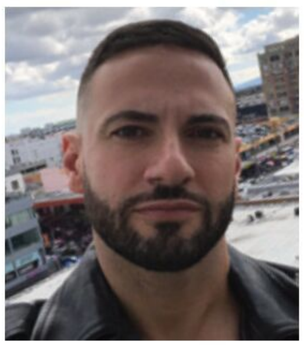
LITTLE SIMZ WEARS LOUIS VUITTON

KOSMAS PAVLOS


THE
CAR
the new album from arctic monkeys

Editor's Letter

Join us in toasting the best of 2022



IN ROLLING STONE UK'S FIRST YEAR of publishing, 14 world-class artists have graced seven print and five digital covers, spotlighting Sam Fender, Lashana Lynch, Charli XCX, Florence + The Machine, Matty Healy of The 1975, Rina Sawayama and Matt Smith, among many others. Oh, and a lad by the name of Harry Styles. (His issue sold out within 24 hours and was reprinted twice, with each printing selling out equally as fast.)

Beyond these cover exclusives, we've also featured an enviable list of world-first interviews with a pantheon of some of the UK's finest names in music, film and TV – from Wolf Alice to Yard Act via Anson Boon and Ashley Walters.

We're a fresh upstart in the magazine world, linked in name and attitude to our big brother US title – the OG Rolling Stone – which has built its peerless reputation by celebrating the best of the best and the boldest of new artists breaking out. Although we are affiliated with our US partner, Rolling Stone UK is independently published – we originate and present our own content, complete with that edgy UK slant you'd expect from us renegade Brits, while collating the best of the US publication.

"Rolling Stone UK has seen 14 world-class artists grace our covers – Harry Styles' issue sold out within 24 hours"

While our editorial commitment has been solid, as with any business (and maybe more so in the publishing industry), you're only as strong as your next cover, and this month delivers a mighty triumvirate of talent to deliver the veritable cherry on the cake to mark a year of the brand publishing in the UK.

Up first is Little Simz, Mercury Prize-winner and star of hit Netflix show *Top Boy*. The multi-talented artist leads the pack of this Rolling Stone UK Awards issue celebrating the acts whose work in 2022 has rewritten the rules on what it means to break new ground in their respective fields.

Joining Simz on our three-cover special is the unstoppable onslaught that is pop-rock star Yungblud. An artist quite used to scoring number one albums, he is also tearing up festival stages across Europe and the US, hosts a BBC Sounds podcast that dives into urgent issues such as mental health, while also producing a short film, *Mars*, that speaks of the queer and trans experience.

Completing the line-up is Bree Runway, a star in the ascendant who counts Megan Thee Stallion, Lil Nas X, Doja Cat, Cardi B, Kehlani and SZA among her stans. An impressive feat considering she's not yet dropped her first full-length album.

To paraphrase a certain Mr Fender, we're only getting started... and we have exhilarating plans for the future. But the truth is, independent magazines such as this – be they online or in print – can only exist with your continued support. The challenges we all face in these precarious times are very real. So, first and foremost, thank you for reading Rolling Stone UK over the past 12 months. It's been a wild ride. Enjoy the rest of this manically unpredictable year, and we'll see you in 2023.

CLIFF JOANNOU
EDITOR IN CHIEF

ON THE COVER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KOSMAS PAVLOS
FASHION DIRECTION AND STYLING BY JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

GLOVES BY ATSUKO KUDO, JEWELLERY BY CHROME HEARTS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KOSMAS PAVLOS
FASHION DIRECTION AND STYLING BY JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

TOP BY ATSUKO KUDO, EARRINGS AND RINGS BY PAWNSHOP

PHOTOGRAPHY BY STONEY
FASHION DIRECTION BY JOSEPH KOCHARIAN
STYLING BY HOLLY WOOD

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LOUIS TOMLINSON

FAITH IN THE FUTURE

THE NEW ALBUM
OUT 11TH NOVEMBER
LOUIS-TOMLINSON.COM

Contributors

Kosmas Pavlos
PHOTOGRAPHER

It was great to have the opportunity to shoot two very different personalities for the cover of Rolling Stone UK. Yungblud and Little Simz were total opposites, but each had equal power and incredible presence, and I had fun shooting both. What I liked the most is that they both gave the impression that they really trusted me with their image and were open to trying all the ideas that I proposed. They love what they do, and it shows.

Kemi Alemoru
WRITER

I love it when your job feels the way you dreamed it would when you were a teenager. Throughout my week shadowing Bree Runway — following her to the set of her new single 'That Girl', watching her don several wigs and razor-sharp, health-and-safety-hazard manicures at the cover shoot, and then roaming around her neighbourhood — it's clear that she is living her childhood pop-star dreams. And in turn, I got to feel like I am realising my goal of becoming a *T4* presenter or that I work at *Poise* (the magazine in *13 Going On 30*), as I rubbed shoulders with the creative minds behind the music I have on repeat, and drew stares from the other patrons of the east London cafe we were sat in as we laughed loudly about lasering our vaginas. It's cheesy, but Bree Runway's optimism (or self-described "delusion") reminded me that you really do have to keep going for your grandiose dreams, no matter how outlandish they seem. You just need to become convinced that you are 'That Girl'.

Kwajo Tweneboa
HOUSING CAMPAIGNER AND PRESENTER OF CHANNEL 4'S *UNTOLD: HELP! MY HOME IS DISGUSTING*

I'm a national campaigner who has travelled the country advocating for social housing tenants who are living in substandard accommodation and being ignored by their landlords. My work started after my family and I lived in disrepair for years and our complaints fell on deaf ears. I have also been advising the government on legislation needed to tackle the housing crisis and, in particular, tenants being forced to live in poor housing.

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Scents and sensibility

The always experimental beauty brand Byredo have enlisted photographer Alasdair McLellan for their Eyes Closed fragrance campaign. Inspired by McLellan's 'The Perfect Kiss', the pictures feature both mixed and same-sex couples kissing, displaying that love is love. All have their eyes closed, reflecting the ethos of the perfume that when you shut off one of your senses, the intensity of the others is heightened. At £182 for the eau de parfum (100ml), the scent opens with warming top notes of cinnamon and cardamom, followed by freshening carrot, orris butter and ginger, while patchouli and papyrus base notes combine for an aromatic blend that gives you all the feels.

BYREDO.COM

ALASDAIR MCLELLAN

Strings attached

This is American Vintage II, the all-new California-made range of electric guitars from Fender. Paying homage to the 50s, 60s and 70s — three decades that reshaped the sonic landscape of music — these instruments have been meticulously crafted to have the look, feel, sound and style of the models that set the gold standard for electric guitar and bass. Starting at £1,999, the stunning guitars feature pickups and neck profiles made famous during music's defining eras. The only limit now is your imagination.

FENDER.COM

Retro style

MATCHESFASHION have looked across the Atlantic for one of their latest brands to champion. Connor McKnight's collection is inspired by his Washington D.C. roots and the vintage outerwear worn by America's Black youth. The range also draws on historical references, including workwear donned by African Americans after the American Civil War, as well as McKnight's family history, such as the home his grandfather built in the 50s. The utilitarian pieces are carefully crafted and come in muted hues, with hand-painted prints and experimental textures.

MATCHESFASHION.COM

Music makers

To celebrate their first half century, electronic instrument leaders Roland have collaborated with boutique publisher Bjooks to create *INSPIRE THE MUSIC*, a lavishly illustrated, 400-page, coffee-table book packed with dozens of interviews, articles and plenty of historical eye candy. Starting with the pioneering brand's humble beginnings in 70s Japan, the book documents Roland's 50-year journey — and how they brought the music world along for the ride.

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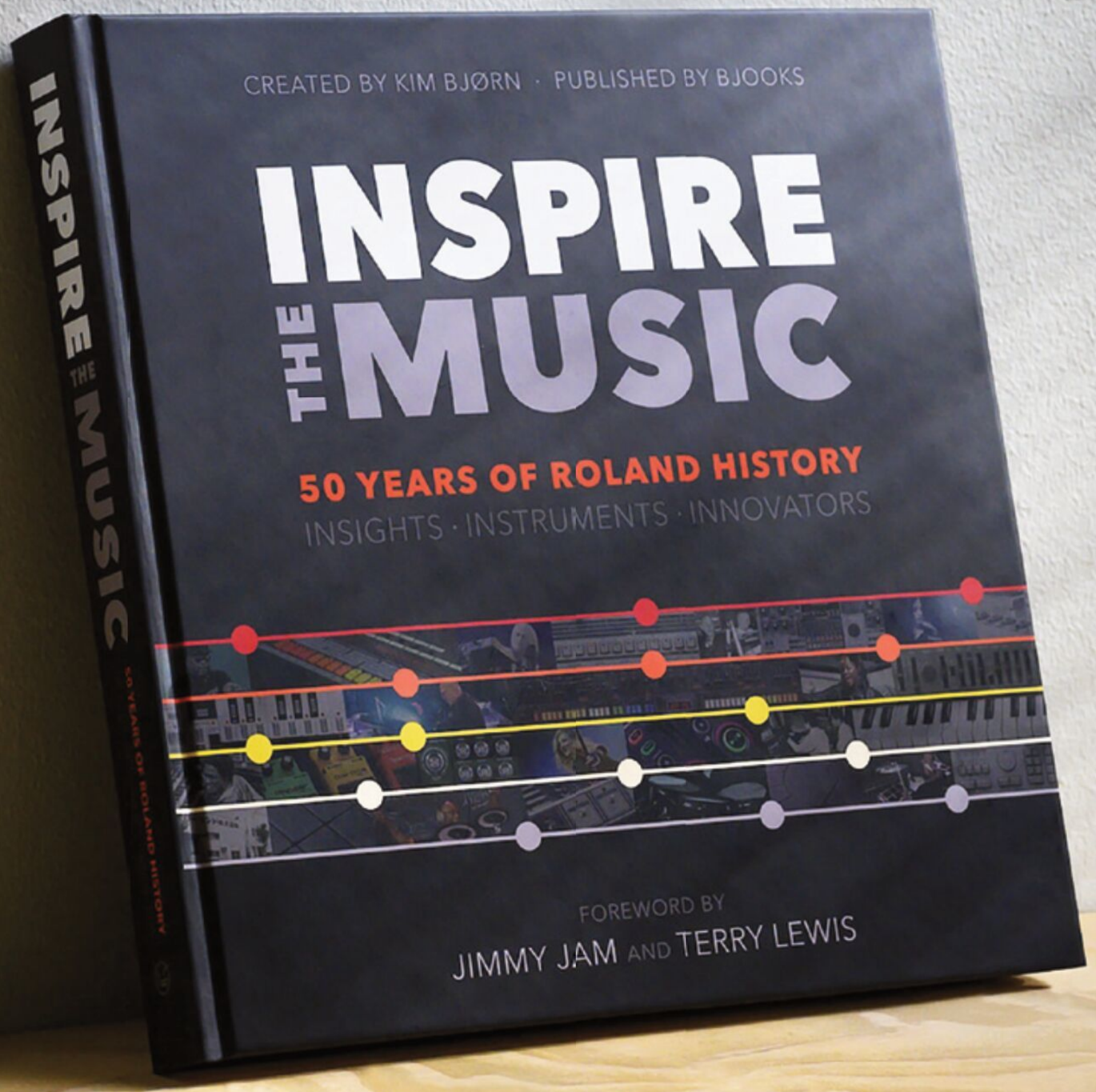

Sidewalk stomp

Dr. Martens were as synonymous with the punk movement as sky-high mohicans and studded leather jackets, so the iconic shoe brand's latest collaboration makes complete sense. After "46 years in the making", they have teamed up with The Clash for a new line that neatly reflects the punk band's legacy. Available in two styles — the 1460 eight-eye boot and the 1461 three-eye shoe — the collection is billed as an homage to "one of the greatest bands in British history". Each pair comes with The Clash logo stamped on the side as well as on a dog tag, and an assortment of lace options. To mark the release, legendary DJ and close friend of the band Don Letts has collated The Story of The Clash in 100 Tracks, a playlist of essential tunes for fans to listen to while they're stepping out in the range. Go forth and release your inner Joe Strummer.

DRMARTENS.COM

All time high

The rugged hybrid GPS smartwatch from Garmin offers a classic analogue experience with advanced smart functionality and a high-resolution digital screen. The built-in RevoDrive technology delivers accurate analogue timekeeping in even the most demanding environments, allowing you to train your way with built-in sports apps, including a variety of activities from strength training to mountain biking. With 24/7 health monitoring and a battery life of up to 28 days in smartwatch mode, the Instinct Crossover delivers a more complete look at your day.

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The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

The only way is up

Sam Ryder truly changed the record when he snatched second place for the UK in this year's Eurovision Song Contest with 'Space Man'. With a new album on the way, his feet have barely touched the ground since, as he tells Rolling Stone UK

FEW ARTISTS HAVE managed to put their musical stamp on 2022 quite like Sam Ryder. When the year began, he was the TikTok sensation who garnered a massive audience during lockdown when his covers of Justin Bieber and Alicia Keys showed off those pipes and attracted millions of views.

But as the year ends, Ryder has defined 2022 by becoming the UK's highest-scoring Eurovision entry in years. He may have been pipped to victory by Ukraine, but the country's ongoing war with Russia means that the contest, at long last, will be hosted in the UK next year thanks to Ryder's impressive second place.

With an anticipated debut album set for release later this month, we caught up with Ryder as he reflects on his achievements.

SPACED OUT Sam Ryder's first album will, of course, feature his Eurovision hit 'Space Man'

How's it been hitting the road for your first post-Eurovision tour?

It's been so good. They're countries I've visited before and played to no one. I've done the transit van slogs with bands that I've been in. It's been wild to play some of the same venues that have previously been empty, but it's just exciting to see crowds there. I've been in situations before where I can hear people cashing up the till or the squeak of the mop, but I can't now! That's been nice.

How much has life changed since Eurovision? Have you been able to stop and take stock?

Yeah, definitely. There's been a semblance of checking in regularly. Ultimately, it comes down to gratitude for the new milestones I get to experience. They're things I wouldn't have dared to dream about, like playing with Queen and Dave Grohl [at Wembley's Taylor Hawkins Tribute Concert] because that's a pipe dream, really. But then you've just got to be thankful.

I've always been into music — it's been the one thing I've wanted to make a career out of. I was singing at weddings before this, and I was happy with that. I felt fulfilled, I had a purpose, which meant that when I was announced for Eurovision, I knew I wouldn't be looking for happiness and validation because I already had it. It safeguards you from the pitfalls that we know all too well can happen in this industry.

What are your memories of Eurovision like? Did it become a blur as your score kept going up?

I was surrounded by my pals and that was the biggest thing for me. I could

have had the same experience but if I was surrounded by people that were new in my life from the label and industry, it wouldn't have been the same. I love them dearly in my life, but it wouldn't have held nearly as much importance. I was sitting with my partner and my friend Kaz, we've known each other for nearly 10 years and he's the tour manager now. All of us just sat together and enjoyed this thing. The disbelief of seeing us climb up that scoreboard, we were just sat there and none of us could believe it. Nothing else mattered, I was with my friends and it was just good to be there.

So you've kept a quite close-knit circle around you?

Yeah, because you want it to change your work life, but you can't let it change your actual life. Work can become way busier and exciting, but the goal is to keep real life as boring and delightfully mundane as it was before. I just love hanging out with my family and eating a curry on a Saturday night. Or walking my dog along the sea wall where I live. Ultimately, you have to remember you're just a guest in this new world where doors have opened to you. I'm 33 years old, man! I've lived a long life before this and I know what makes me happy: it's sitting down with a sandwich and watching Formula 1.

Still, your performance of 'Somebody to Love' with Dave Grohl and Queen felt like a special moment.

It was so cool meeting those guys, they've climbed to the top of the music mountain and put a flag in the peak. To see how normal and lovely they are, having done all that, was amazing. I was sitting there beforehand and someone came along and put their hand on my back because they wanted to grab me for a minute. It was Dave Grohl! He didn't have to say hello to me, but to make someone who isn't in that circle and at the beginning of their journey, which I am, feel so welcome, was just incredible. That was pure kindness and it was even cooler to see how they still hang around looking at each other's guitars and guitar pedals. It felt like nothing had changed from their first ever band practice with their mates as teenagers. It was the same energy! Everyone was looking at Brian May's midi switchboard and I just loved that. It showed me that we don't have to become rock stars to find the pure joy in music. You have it from the very beginning and that's what they're still doing.

Did they give you any advice?

They were so encouraging, but Freddie

Mercury has always been one of my heroes. He's the first person I ever remember singing along to as a toddler in the car. The 'Living on My Own' remix had just came out and I was doing the "*dee do de de*" bit. There's been a lot of Freddie influence in my life.

Your debut album, *There's Nothing but Space, Man!*, arrives on 18 November. What does it say about you as an artist?

It's a debut typically in the sense that there's a lot going on, you're drawing on an excitement and enthusiasm because you haven't been in the industry long enough to become jaded. But I think it focuses on the idea of retaining hope and faith and that's been a massive part of my journey. You've found this thing that you love, which is performing and singing for me. How many people do you know out there who don't love what they're doing? They haven't found that thing that lights them up. The album

"I've lived a long life before this and I know what makes me happy"

is about the idea of once you've found that thing, never ceasing to grab onto it, never giving up and following that journey and path.

For you, where does that enthusiasm come from? You seem relentlessly positive.

I've been through the whole spectrum of emotions, like many other humans, and found this is the best way to live. You're not always in that state and the last few days on this tour have been incredibly trying because I've had no sleep and it can be tough, but you're still in the game! I've worked so many years in construction dreaming of being in the spot that I am now, so you understand that the moments where things are a bit tough are the tax you pay for the thing you love doing.

Next year sees Liverpool host Eurovision because Ukraine, sadly, is unable to.

It's going to be incredibly collaborative, but if you're looking for a hotel it's going to suck for you! It's in the tens of thousands if you're hoping to stay for a few nights! But seriously, it's going to celebrate Ukrainian culture, while also celebrating UK music, too. We're in Liverpool, it's literally the birthplace of pop music through The Beatles, you could argue. It's going to be an amazing meeting of two countries that want to celebrate this amazing thing.

TaP Music are involved in picking the act again, which bodes well after your success.

The most important thing to take away from this is that there was never a stigma against the UK in Eurovision. That was something we invented in our heads, so the coolest thing to take away is a fresh attitude. You asked about optimism and part of that for me is getting rid of habitual thought patterns, like putting yourself down. That was what we wanted to do with Eurovision and it's a massive team effort. Eurovision is going to be incredibly interesting; we're stepping into a new musical landscape with TikTok and people working out of their bedrooms that have an online support network. If you want to get involved, you'll need to put your best foot forward.

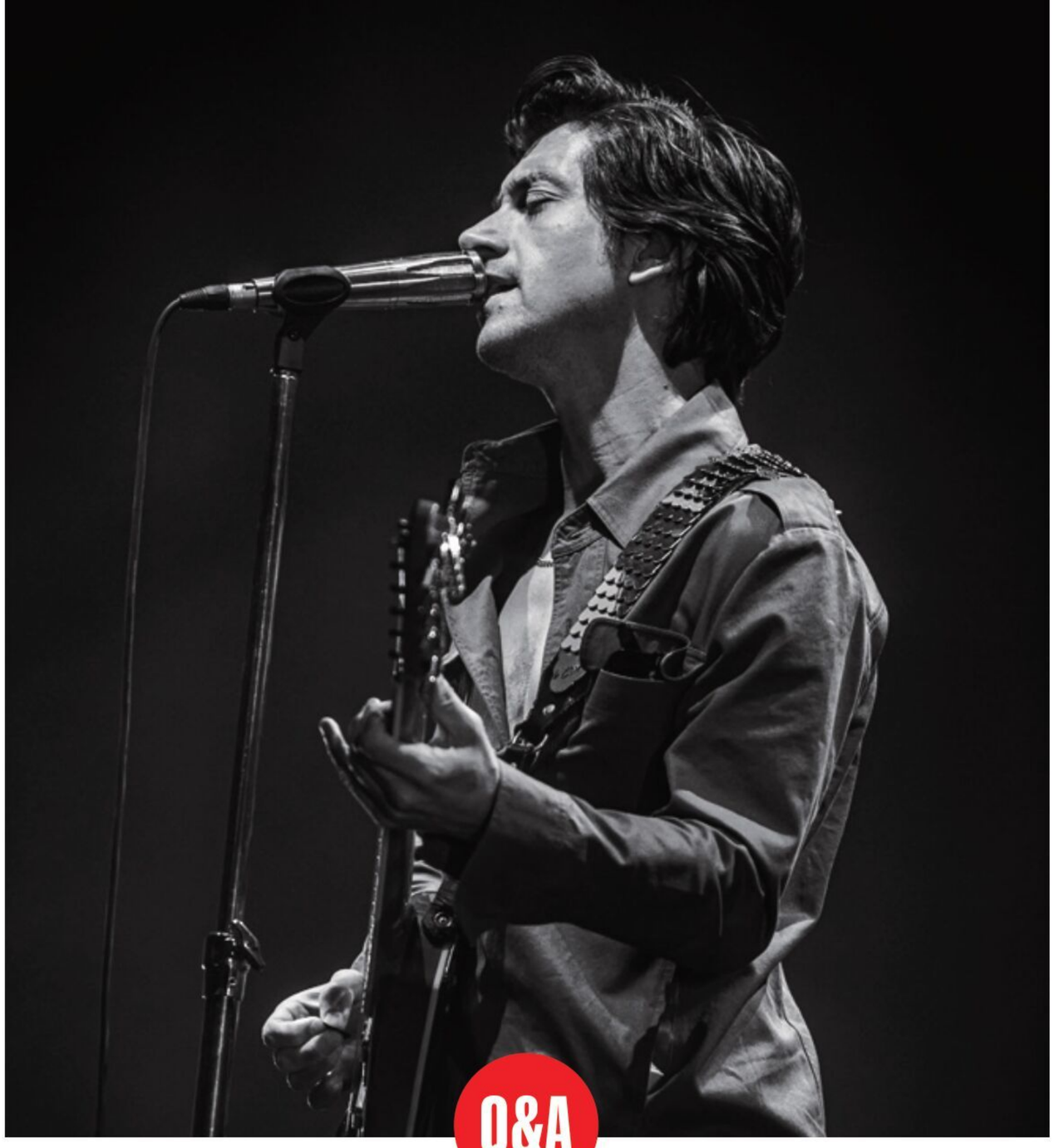
It feels like TikTok is going to be huge for musical diversity. People doing music on the most DIY terms can finally break through — just like you did.

Yes! And Eurovision needs to reflect the plethora of musical talent in the UK. Eurovision has been an open goal for years, but a lot of people also believe it's a poisoned chalice, so you haven't been getting them in droves wanting to do Eurovision. I think that's going to change and that's what I'm excited about: we really get to celebrate the vast range of diverse talent in the UK. It's someone else's journey now and I just hope that they're a fan of Eurovision, because they won't get hung up on the scoreboard. I want them to be able to soak up all the amazing stuff and have the same experience that we did. **NICK REILLY**

FAST FACTS

ON THE ROAD Ryder will embark on a 14-date UK and Ireland tour next year

CHEERS He gave up alcohol months before Eurovision and had his first drink — sparkling wine — after coming off the Eurovision stage



Q&A

Alex Turner

The Arctic Monkeys frontman on big rock guitars, evolving as a band, and revving up for their latest album, The Car

BY BRIAN HIATT

FROM THE moment the world heard the frantic majesty of Arctic Monkeys' classic debut, 2006's *Whatever People Say I Am, That's What I'm Not*, it was obvious the foursome were headed for rock greatness. But great bands have always reserved the right to swerve into detours that baffle some fans while perhaps making new ones – and Arctic Monkeys are no exception. Their commercial and creative high point, the groove-rock stomper *AM,* was one of the last albums by a rock band to truly shake the culture. They followed it with five years of silence. Then, in 2018, came the gorgeous but defiantly odd space-lounge concept album *Tranquility Base Hotel & Casino*. With their lush new follow-up, *The Car*, they're still a lot more interested in sculpting hi-fi soundscapes than blasting your face off, with rich strings and Steely Dan-level studio gloss applied to mostly slow-burning songs, albeit with a bit more rock muscle this time. "I don't think it sounds like a different band, but I can imagine that's something that can get thrown around," says frontman Alex Turner. "I think what makes it sound like the same band is that we're not betraying our instinct to challenge our idea of what the band can be."

Did you, on any level, feel burned out on big rock after making *AM*?
It's definitely a rock record, that *AM*, isn't it? But to us, there was always something else going on in there that gets it over the line. I don't know if it's the break after it or what, but it doesn't seem that straightforward getting back there. I don't ever remember feeling burned out on big rock. It just seemed, you know, any moves you made to try and move back in that direction… These other paths that we've discovered always seemed to make more sense.

You once said that somehow a direct progression from *AM* wasn't an option, that you did the only thing you could do.
Absolutely. Yeah. I think it was important to step away. I worked on other things, and they probably led to *Tranquility* being what we ended up doing there. And there may have been, honestly, occasions where I've attempted to sort of put the motorcycle boots back on and figure out what an *AM*-type tune would be. But it almost seems like a spoof or something when I start playing it out with those ideas at the moment. It remains to be seen. I'm not saying we're never going to do something that sounds a bit like Sabbath again. I'm not ruling out the possibility – I feel that there are moments of big rock on this record.

You kind of pull those sounds in and out, right?
On some of these songs, you've got the band on a fader, and they come in. On the third song on the record, 'Sculptures Of Anything Goes', it's all just a Moog and a drum machine and a vocal. But there's a few bars in it where the rock band gets switched on and then goes into the background again.

That is one of the key differences between this album and the last one.
You're getting some distorted guitar. And I would attribute that to having the session with the band and everyone together. On 'Body Paint', I was surprised how distorted and rock the ending of that [song] got on the guitar. When I started playing with the lads again, it's like, "Oh, yeah. I want to dig in a bit and play rock guitar."

When you're using the band as only one element in the sound, what kind of dissension, if any, is there?
From the rest of the guys? Those sorts of ideas, the more time's gone on, the more encouraging they have been about them. I think once upon a time, when we had the windbreakers zipped up to here and the guitar was really tight, we were all playing all at once all the time, and that's how it was. But I think we all have started to realise that using that space can be quite effective. And if you're the one not playing, *you're* still the one that's not playing, you know?

The 'Do I Wanna Know' riff is everywhere — kids learning guitar constantly play it on TikTok. What do you make of that?
Wow. I dunno, man. That guitar, the 12-string orange Vox guitar we bought right at the end of the *Suck It and See* session [in 2011]… the 'Do I Wanna Know' riff, like, came with it. It was built in.

Matt Healy from The 1975 said that he thought the first decade of the 00s belonged to you guys, but that his band took the second decade.
[*Laughs*] Oh yeah?

Are you willing to cede that territory?
I concede. And now we're in the third. Watch this space.

Your band has been around for 20 years, incredibly. Do you want to be like the Stones and stay together pretty much forever?
I'm just trying to get through [our next show at] Kings Theatre at the moment. I don't think that's a plan I'm gonna draw up tonight. The show's getting stronger. It feels like it's becoming something else, and I think the inclusion of this new material within that is only gonna hopefully help. It's hard not to get excited about that. It's one step at a time. Let's see where this *Car* leads us. ®

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Toby Sebastian

In 2021, Toby Sebastian released 'Midnight', a mellow and contemplative acoustic number featuring the vocals of actress Florence Pugh. It proved a star-studded addition, although securing Pugh's involvement is no tough task when she's your actual sister.

"I hadn't seen her for a while because of Covid, and I'd returned home to Oxford from a TV shoot in Dublin, and she was there. It was my mum's idea to put her backing vocals on the track and I wasn't sure at first because I'd already mixed it. Now, though, it was obviously such a great idea because her vocals are so different to mine, and I can't imagine the track without it."

A-lister involvement aside, Sebastian's songs prove that talent runs through the veins of this family. Recent single 'Rock Rolling' is a stomping slice of Vampire Weekend-esque indie pop, while 'Real Kicks' shows off a laid-back and retro side to his sound. Crucially, though, they're both earworms.

▲ Dolores Forever

For Dolores Forever, it's firmly a case of friends first, band second. The duo — Yorkshire's Hannah Wilson and Copenhagen's Julia Fabrin — bonded over common interests and a shared love of music before deciding to give it a proper go.

"We met on a rooftop at a party," they tell Rolling Stone UK. "We seemed to be at a place in life where we had so much in common and it really seemed to be a friendship first, but we let our emotions flow naturally and eventually that turned into our band."

That kinship finds itself at the heart of the duo's music. Although 'Rothko' has been their breakout track, recent single 'Funeral' sees the heavy titular matter being paired with irresistible 80s-style hooks. "*If I died would you be at my funeral/If I lied and said that everything was OK*," comes their central question.

If their early songs are anything to go by, they'll be more alive than ever in 2023.

▼ Caity Baiser

With two upcoming dates at London's XOYO under her belt, Caity Baiser is already winning a legion of fans with her razor-sharp pop tunes. Tracks such as 'Friendly Sex' are an ode to the dangers of catching feelings, while 'X&Y' — a smart skewering of millennial habits — has clocked up millions of streams on TikTok. Aided by huge hooks and honest, funny songwriting, it feels like she could be a defining voice of 2023.

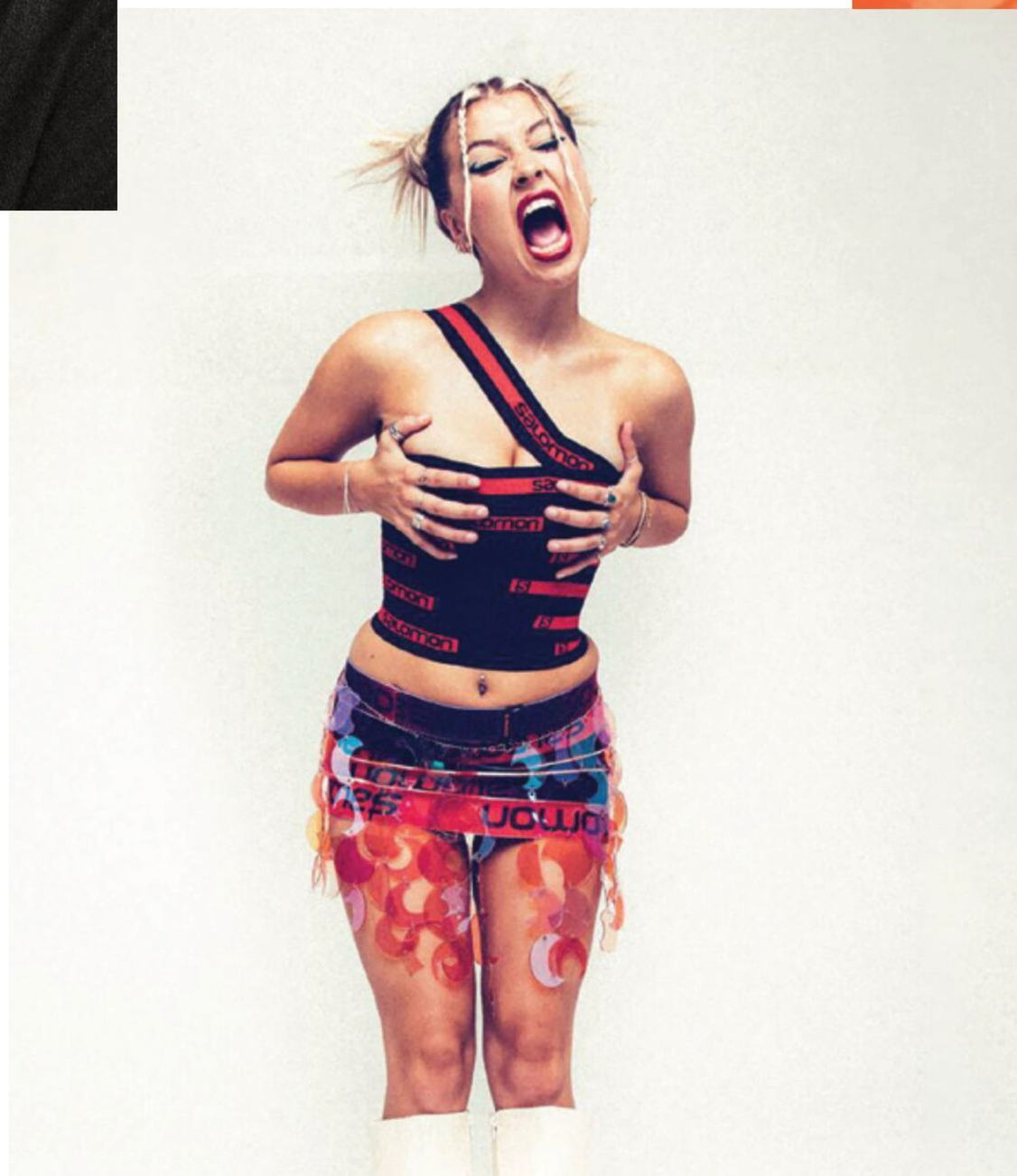
RS RECOMMENDS

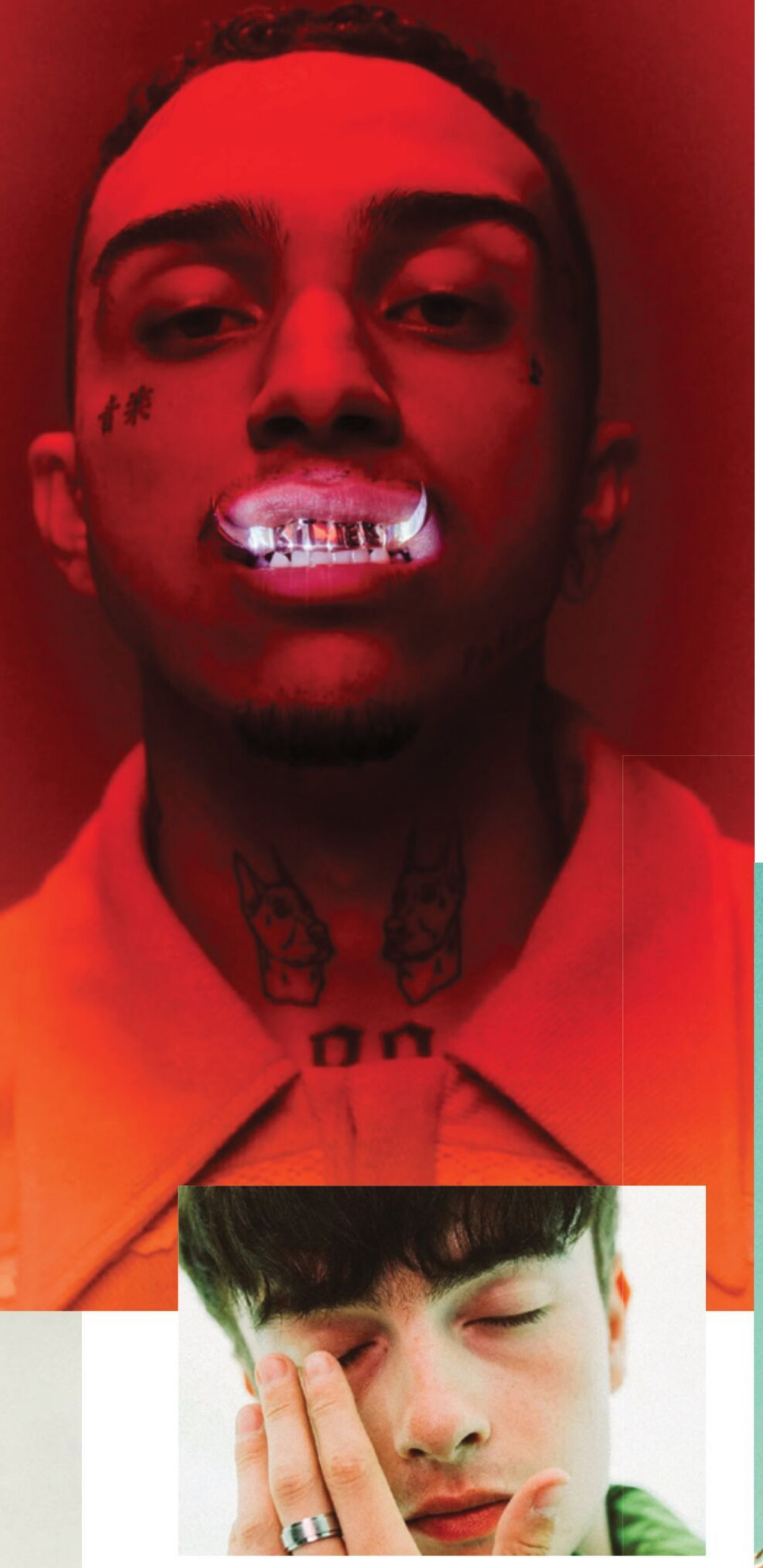
STAY ON TRACK WITH OUR PICK OF THE NEW MUSIC MAKERS

Ones to watch

As 2022 comes to an end, Rolling Stone UK looks at the acts likely to worm their way into your headphones next year

BY NICK REILLY





◀ Deyaz

Deyaz cut his teeth in east London's underground scene as a teenager, playing drums in punk bands and producing rap tracks along the way. This lived experience has allowed him to become a true musical polymath, developing a subtle genre-blending sound through which he can tell stories of his own emotional struggles with homelessness, mental health and addiction.

"*Clinging to a mountain top, praying you won't let me drop, 'cos I don't know if I can swim/ When you're holding me limb by limb*," comes his frank address on the stunning 'Don't Leave, Don't Go'.

2023 feels like his for the taking.

▼ DYLAN

When DYLAN was a child, her dad gave her an unlikely, yet formative lesson in the art of performing live.

"He's a very straight-down-the-line man, but his outlet was being a wannabe rock god. He'd have us on the kitchen table at a very young age with plywood guitars, singing to the likes of AC/DC and Guns N' Roses. I was on the table going 'Hello, Wembley!'" she tells Rolling Stone UK.

It was a sign of things to come. DYLAN made her debut at that very same cavernous venue this summer, where she was tasked with the small matter of supporting Ed Sheeran. It's testament to how she's already proving to be one of pop's most hotly tipped prospects, no doubt helped by her formidable live performances.

Her intimate shows for her burgeoning cult fandom are proving the stuff of legend, while tracks such as the electropop-tinged 'No Romeo' and 'Someone Else' offer a sage dissection of universal relationship troubles.

"My lyrics don't hold back. I don't tend to use metaphors; I don't beat around the bush or use smoke and mirrors. They're straight to the point, and it's me just screaming about how I feel at that moment. Fans can latch onto that."

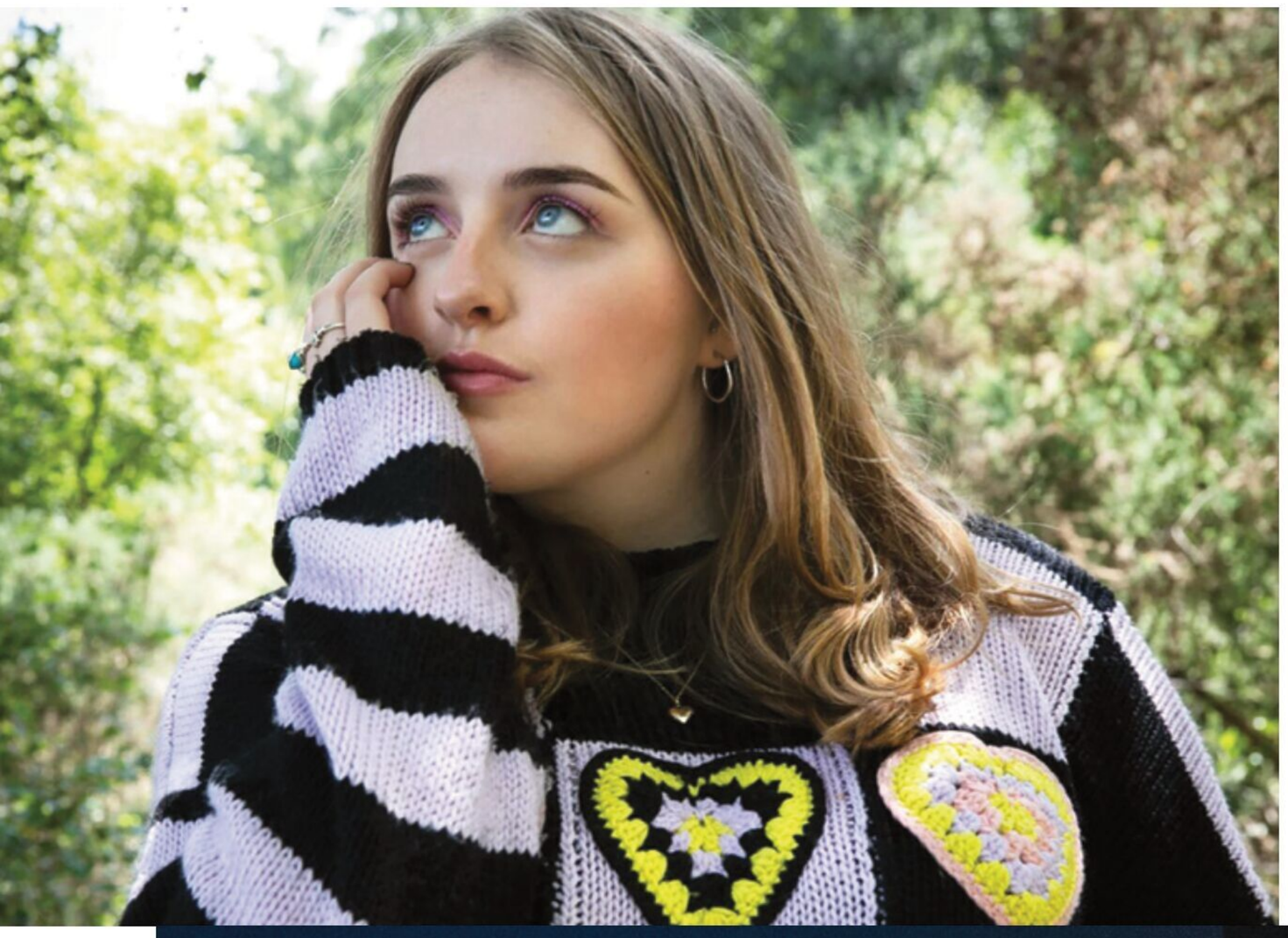
▲ Dylan Fraser

He might be primed for a big breakthrough in 2023, but Dylan Fraser is already looking past next year. On recent EP '2030 Revolution', the alt-pop artist proves a deft hand at contrasting glitchy Thom Yorke instrumentation with lyrics that look at a not-so-certain tomorrow. The title track is a bold look at how long the world can continue without radical change, while 'Apartment Complex on the Eastside' contemplates the joy that might be found in sacking it all off and moving to New York.

"It's that, but also the idea that we're all together in this shithole, so we might as well just enjoy the things we can enjoy in life. It sounds cliched, but it's important to find fun among the chaos."

It's a bold vision from an artist who tells Rolling Stone UK he always knew music was his calling. Fraser dropped out of school at 15, before retreating to his bedroom to hone his craft. The result is a sound that feels real, modern and authentically his.

CAITY BAISER: LILLY CRAIGEN, DYLAN: LILLIE EIGER



Nell Mescal

On debut single 'Graduating', upcoming indie folk star Nell Mescal proves she's a voice to be reckoned with.

Nell, the 19-year-old sister of *Normal People* star Paul, told Rolling Stone UK earlier this year how she mined personal depths to deliver the stunning track, which recounts how her personal struggles with school led her to leave entirely.

"I left school early due to some struggles and that song is about thinking you're completely alone in a situation but realising that if you keep your head down you can miss other people who are going through the same things."

The track's universal themes of isolation and heartbreak, combined with Mescal's powerful vocals, mean that she's set to become one of 2023's most relevant and relatable voices.

Hannah Grae

The name Hannah Grae will already be well known to TikTok users, after the singer set the platform alight last year with a contemporary spin on Aqua's pop classic 'Barbie Girl' that offered a razor-sharp skewering of gender inequality.

Now, her debut single 'Propaganda' proves that Hannah's clever lyricism is no one-off. The track leans heavily into Olivia Rodrigo-esque pop punk to take aim at unrealistic beauty standards presented by social media. It couldn't have arrived at a better time, either — pop punk is going through the strongest of revivals and Hannah could well be the UK's next great flagbearer for that scene.

"Watching TikTok, there's a sense of teen angst after being locked up for two years," she explains. "I've personally experienced it and op punk seems like a good outlet for that."

Musically, Grae was raised on a diet of Taylor Swift and Miley Cyrus, before a producer introduced her to the music that has, so far, shaped her material. "He showed me bands like Green Day and My Chemical Romance and I'd show him Taylor Swift and Miley Cyrus. We've managed to gel those worlds together and that's what my next project sounds like."

So, are there any ambitions to collaborate with any pop punk icons? "I'd love to do a song with Green Day's Billie Joe Armstrong. I love 'Basket Case', so I'd love to do a more theatrical version of that."

▲ Connie Campsie

"The music I'm writing now is what I feel, how I feel and when I feel it. Before I was writing this music, I felt like it was a case of wanting to be like *that* girl in indie, but it was meaningless to me," Connie Campsie tells Rolling Stone UK.

It's a statement reflective of her rise so far. London singer Connie Campsie has caught our attention over the past year with songs that wear genuine empathy and world-worn relationship troubles on their sleeve. Take recent track 'Sucker', by her own admission an ode to the perils of "unrequited love". "It's a love song about music as a creative practice. I think of music as the apathetic love of my life: it turns up whenever it pleases, leaves for as long as it wants, and knows I'll do anything for it. I suppose 'Sucker' is then in essence actually a simp song. I'm the Sucker because I'm saying: 'I'm always going to want you if you'll please, please have me.'"

▼ STONE

Liverpool rockers STONE have been highlighted previously, but their upcoming debut EP 'Punkadonk' is a rip-roaring ride through their furious sound, delivered at breakneck speed. With a string of sold-out shows under their belt, we're expecting them to become one of 2023's most buzzy bands.

"Our music is just a conduit to all the emotion that we feel. We're living in this scary sensational world of social media, where everything is overexposed and overwhelming. But we're all in it as a generation," says guitarist Elliot Gill. "Me and Fin [Power, vocals/guitar] have our own struggles with mental health, and I think that's why we do what we do with such an intensity; we put up that part of ourselves onstage just to give kids an opportunity to connect with something."

▲ Brooke Combe

Scottish star Brooke Combe first caught our eye in the middle of lockdown last year when her soulful, bedroom-recorded take on Arctic Monkeys' 'Why'd You Only Call Me When You're High' became a viral hit.

The massive reaction was entirely deserved, but it's what came next that underpins why we have selected Combe as one of 2023's defining talents. On her recent track 'Miss Me Now', she delivered a powerful soul performance, complete with funkadelic bass lines and infectious choruses. Elsewhere, 'A Game', is a classic soul number full of torment and romantic toil that allows her vocals to truly shine.

"There's a whole other side to me that I want to show through my music," she tells Rolling Stone UK. "I'm mixed race but I grew up in what felt like a bit of a white world. As I was thinking about my Black roots, I wanted to discover what would connect me with them more. Obviously, my skin colour is a massive part of that, but my love of soul music is the route I want to delve into and discover more. It's what I love and I want to create it. Marvin Gaye has always been a bit of a god for me."

STONE: CHARLIE HARRIS, NELL MESCAL: JEMIMA MARRIOTT

MUSIC

Heavy Is the Hand That Holds the Mic

Doechii has a big spotlight on her as record label TDE's first female rapper. She couldn't be more ready

PHOTOGRAPH BY **NICOL BIESEK**

WORKING IN the Carson, California, studio from which Top Dawg Entertainment (TDE) was launched has become something of a rite of passage for new artists on the label. After building the studio in the back of his suburban home around 2004, founder Anthony "Top Dawg" Tiffith rounded up four of the most talented MCs in the LA area – Kendrick Lamar, Jay Rock, ScHoolboy Q, and Ab-Soul – and brought out the best in them. Nearly two decades later, TDE's first female rapper found herself in the wood-panelled, windowless cave known as the House of Pain. "Yes, child, they had me in that cold-ass studio," says Doechii. "I was in that studio struggling, writing music, no heater. I don't want to go back."

Doechii, 24, caught the attention of multiple labels after her breakout hit, 2020's keenly autobiographical 'Yucky Blucky Fruitcake', took off on TikTok – notably as a soundtrack to people showing who they once were and who they are now. "I didn't predict that there would be people showing their weight transformations, or trans women and trans men showing their transitions, people showing their glow-ups," Doechii told Rolling Stone last year.

She wasn't interested in most of the labels that pursued her, but when Top Dawg's son Anthony "Moosa" Tiffith, now TDE's president, got in touch, the alignment was almost immediate. Within two weeks of her first meeting with TDE, she had moved to LA, leaving most of her belongings back in Georgia with her mum. "Child, I left that stuff," she recalls. "I got that check. It was over."

As she has gained notoriety for her animated rap delivery, quirky narratives, gorgeous singing voice, and predilection for house beats, Doechii has been compared to successes like Nicki Minaj, Missy Elliott and Azaelia Banks. While she appreciates the comparisons, she isn't giving them much credence. "It's just like the first time the world got exposed to Lady Gaga," she says. "A lot of their comparisons lay with Madonna, because they [were] trying to make sense of what's happening now based on what they've heard before."

"I'm excited for the future of the label," says Doechii, who is the first female rapper on TDE. "Because I *am* the future of the label"

Doechii is at once serious and silly, slick and unhinged. She's comfortable over all kinds of production, from celestial slow jams to eccentric rap beats to pulsing dance music. This agility shines on a recent EP called *she/her/black bitch*. Doechii says she reclaimed the slur after it followed her around Tampa, Florida, where she grew up – from predominantly white schools to mostly Hispanic neighbourhoods to primarily Black ones, those words were there, trying to degrade her. "I have embodied the slur 'Black bitch' and made a whole archetype out of it," she says. "I see this Black girl, and she's super powerful, creative, confident. She knows who she is."

As a teen, she got serious about dance, studying ballet, tap, contemporary, and gymnastics. She performed with a marching band. She started a vlog where she told elaborate and exaggerated stories about her life. Today, you can see her skills of movement and persona in videos like the nudity- and violence-laden one for her spring single, 'Crazy', which was age-restricted on YouTube.

As she continues to work on her debut for TDE, including sessions with Pharrell Williams and Babyface, Doechii is mindful of her place on one of the most influential labels of the past decade. She's grateful for the example set by SZA, with whom she's toured and recorded: "SZA really paved a way," Doechii says. "It made my job easier. Now they know that not only can women sell, but really we bring the most money in."

She cites Kendrick Lamar, who left TDE this year, as another "beacon of light". "He's a huge example for all of us," she says. "I'm excited for the future of the label, because I *am* the future of the label." **MANKAPRR CONTEH**

FAST FACTS

IN THE STARS Doechii wants her debut to reflect four tarot cards: death, the devil, the hermit, and the star.

SHOTS She and SZA bonded over drinks: "We got drunk together. I felt like we really connected over that tequila."

HAIR BY TYLER. MAKEUP BY KAVONDRE ONAZH. STYLING BY TIZITA BALEMLAY

16 Faces of Cate Blanchett

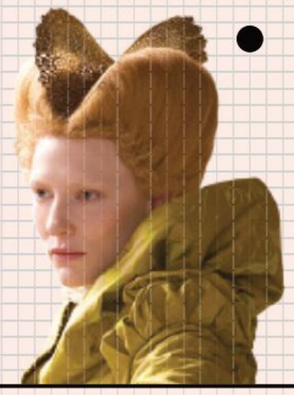
In new movie* Tár, *the Oscar winner plays a classical-music conductor caught in a downward spiral – another entry in her stable of complicated women, which we've charted from kindly Earth Mother to Goddess of Death. By David Fear

MOTHERLY

***The Gift* (2000)**
Her Southern mother is also a psychic, which puts her in the middle of a torrid murder case.

***The Lord of the Rings* (2001-03)**
All hail Galadriel, Middle Earth's most benevolent, maternal elf!

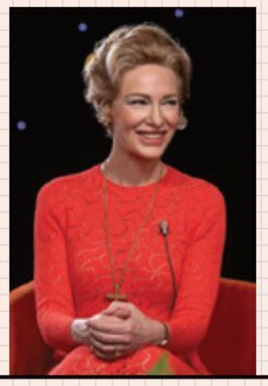
***Elizabeth* (1998)**
England's original Queen Elizabeth gets the royal-badass treatment.



***Where'd You Go, Bernadette?* (2019)**
Answer: Antarctica, where this repressed mum wants a second chance at life.

***Carol* (2015)**
Blanchett is the older woman who unlocks a Sapphic passion in Rooney Mara in Todd Haynes' masterpiece.

***Mrs. America* (2020)**
Meet Phyllis Schlafly, the 70s conservative who fought the ERA amendment and won.



***Cinderella* (2015)**
This stepmother isn't just "wicked"; she's as glamorous as a 40s starlet and rages harder than a kicked nest of hornets.

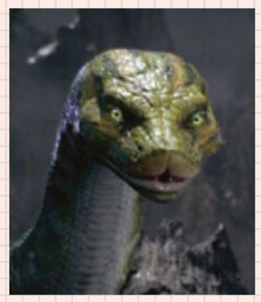
***The Aviator* (2004)**
Who better to play Katharine Hepburn, in all of her golf-playing, alpha-screwball glory?

SUPER-POWERED

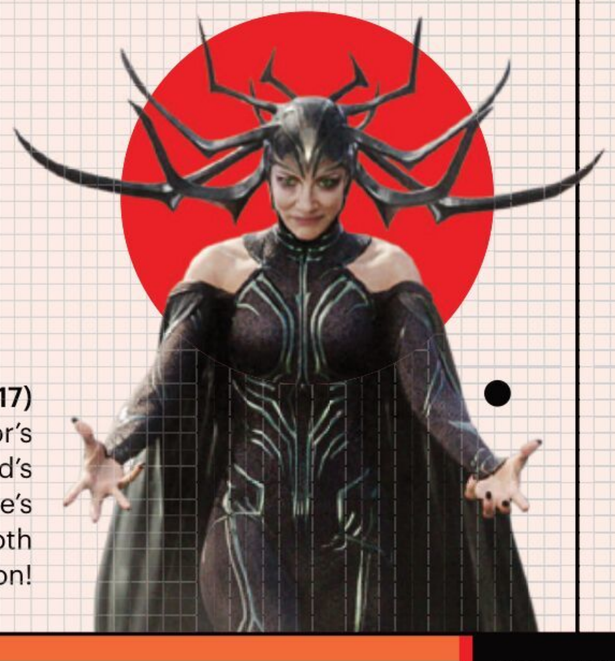
***Coffee and Cigarettes* (2003)**
Blanchett plays two parts in Jim Jarmusch's anthology: Cate, a famous movie star...

***I'm Not There* (2007)**
A hard Cate's gonna fall as Blanchett resurrects the snarky, mercurial Bob Dylan of the mid-60s.

***Mowgli* (2018)**
Blanchett is at her serpentine best as the hypnotic voice of Kaa in this *Jungle Book* adaptation.



***Thor: Ragnarok* (2017)**
Hela is not only Thor's sister and Asgard's Goddess of Death; she's also a supreme mall-goth style icon!



SULTRY

***Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008)**
Sure, her Soviet agent is evil, but those divine bangs!

***Don't Look Up* (2021)**
Her thirsty morning-show host is a kill shot to malicious, me-first media-personality types.

***Coffee and Cigarettes* (2003)**
... and Shelly, her rock-star-dating bohemian cousin who's jealous of her celebrity relative's cushy life.

***Nightmare Alley* (2021)** Noir femme fatales have rarely been this seductive — or dangerous.

SCARY AF

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: PARAMOUNT CLASSICS/EVERETT COLLECTION; WARNER BROS.; ANNAPURNA DISTRIBUTION/EVERETT COLLECTION; WILSON WEBB; UNITED ARTISTS/EVERETT COLLECTION; UNIVERSAL STUDIOS; MIRAMAX/EVERETT COLLECTION; SABRINA LANTOS/FX; DISNEY; WEINSTEIN COMPANY/EVERETT COLLECTION; PARAMOUNT/EVERETT COLLECTION; DISNEY/EVERETT COLLECTION; NIKO TAVERNISE/NETFLIX; MARVEL STUDIOS; UNITED ARTISTS/EVERETT COLLECTION; KERRY HAYES/SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES

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SCAN ME

PROFILE

The Podcast Queen of Hollywood's Golden Age

***Chasing silver-screen ghosts and Los Angeles' forgotten secrets with Karina Longworth, the brilliant mind behind* You Must Remember This**

BY ALEX MORRIS

KARINA LONGWORTH'S house is, quite possibly, haunted. This is not necessarily something she has experienced herself, she tells me of her pale-pink 1926 Mediterranean, where Longworth could be found one July morning on the frond-shadowed patio. But it is something she has on authority from a friend who drunkenly stumbled in from the pool one night and heard, in the empty home, a dinner party going on in the dining room upstairs. Since then, the hauntedness or unhauntedness of Longworth's abode has become a matter of some debate. "My friend thinks my house is haunted," she says wryly. "I think he drinks too much."

Either way, there is certainly no one better at reviving Hollywood's ghosts than Longworth. A film critic and historian, she is best known for the podcast *You Must Remember This,* which she researches, writes and records in a tiny, foam-lined closet off the downstairs office of her husband, director Rian Johnson. In the eight years since she launched with an episode on Kim Novak and a promise to expose "the secret and/or forgotten histories of Hollywood's first century", Longworth has proved herself to be a definitive source on its lore, from the abuses of MGM's studio system to the politics of the Rat Pack. The season on Charles Manson has been cited as one of the best cultural examinations of his Family out there, even though "I didn't come to it from the perspective of true crime," she says. "I came to it through Doris Day."

The skill with which Longworth can connect those dots has garnered her hundreds of thousands of listeners and a cult following that includes Tavi Gevinson, Chloë Sevigny, and Natasha Lyonne, who heard about the podcast and then reached out to Longworth in the hopes of developing a show based on a Hollywood-blacklist episode. "I remember cold-calling her, and I was just totally star-struck," says Lyonne, who has since voiced both Clara Bow and Mae West for the podcast. "Karina sees the underbelly of all our systems, what we're capable of in the reach for power and relevance," says Lyonne. "It's inherently eerie material."

From the beginning, Longworth has leaned into that eeriness. The show almost has the feel of a séance, from the distorted voice of Dooley Wilson singing 'As Time Goes By' in the opening to the breathy way Longworth invites the listener to "Join us, won't you?" But the ghosts she conjures, fleshes out and humanises aren't just the famous ones. They are also the ones who've been forgotten, buried in the archives of the Academy's Margaret Herrick Library, lost to the fleeting fancies of public opinion, starring in films that will never be seen again because not a single copy is still in existence. Her signature move is to use a subject people think they know about to tell a more profound story – especially if it involves a woman whose legacy has been plastered over by that of a man.

In high school, Longworth took to reading the old-movie listings in the back of *TV Guide*. "I knew that Myrna Loy was a thing before I had ever seen a Myrna Loy movie," she says.

Longworth is 42 and has the heart-shaped face of a silent-film star. On the morning we meet, she is wearing houndstooth trousers and loafers, and is sitting at a wicker patio table strewn with 90s editions of *Movieline* ("How Luke Perry Spent His Spring Vacation"), *Premiere* ("Richard Woos Another Pretty Woman"), and *Ms.* ("Shere Hite Is Back"). She is in the process of researching her 211th episode, which she thinks will be about Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman,* and which will kick off a season called "Erotic '90s", slated to be released this autumn. It's a follow-up to "Erotic '80s", Longworth's most recent season, begun after the pandemic shut down the libraries and archives where she usually turns for research. She had been collecting entertainment magazines from her youth, so she delved in. "If you read every single review of a film that you can find, you do see narratives," she says. "You do see waves. You see a lot of people coming to the same conclusion at the same time."

She picks up a *Movieline,* on the cover of which Drew Barrymore wears pink satin gloves and a sultry

HAIR AND MAKEUP BY COLLEEN DOMINIQUE FOR EXCLUSIVE ARTISTS USING BUMBLE & BUMBLE/NARS

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Ye Rin Mok**

Longworth in her home office. “Los Angeles is very good at erasing its own history,” she says. “There’s a loneliness. There’s a lot of isolation here”

Four Must-Hear Episodes

All of *You Must Remember This* is worth a listen, but here are some standout instalments from Karina Longworth's podcast sure to pull in any new listener

Charles Manson's Hollywood

EPISODE 46:
"The Beach Boys, Dennis Wilson, and Manson the Songwriter"

Charles Manson had connections throughout Hollywood, and in this season — which has been called the definitive podcast on the subject — Longworth picks through his links to stars (Angela Lansbury's daughter actually funded the Manson Family for a time) and the music scene, particularly the Beach Boys' Dennis Wilson, with whom the Family would live for a time before the Tate-LaBianca murders.

Fake News: Fact-Checking *Hollywood Babylon*

EPISODE 131:
"Clara Bow"

Silent-film star Clara Bow may have been the movie industry's first It girl, but thanks to Kenneth Anger's 1959 book — to which Longworth dedicated the season — the Hollywood sex symbol was forever remembered for "tackling" the entire USC football team, so to speak. This isn't true, of course, and in this episode (featuring special guest Natasha Lyonne), Longworth details the brash Brooklynite's real-life exploits during an era of sexual liberation.

Star Wars

EPISODE 39:
"Walt Disney"

Longworth has talked about her connection to Walt Disney and the rereleased movies her mother took her to as a child (including *Song of the South*, a racist 1946 film on which Longworth later based an entire season). In this episode, part of a series on Hollywood during the Second World War, she looks at the complicated life of the man himself — from the debt he incurred bringing his vision to life to the conservative politics that would "land him on the wrong side of history", as she puts it on the show.

Polly Platt, the Invisible Woman

EPISODE 161:
"Peter Bogdanovich and the Woman Behind the Auteur"

Thanks to an unpublished memoir given to Longworth by Polly Platt's daughters — as well as interviews with them and others close to Platt — this season does what Longworth does best: it shines a light on a brilliant, forgotten woman behind a larger-than-life man. This episode details the film designer's early relationship with Peter Bogdanovich and how she shaped his vision for *Targets* and *The Last Picture Show*.

expression. "I vaguely remember this," she says. "I definitely remember the narrative, which is: 'She went to rehab, but she's still a bad girl. She's so sexy. Who cares that she's only 17?'"

In an episode of *You Must Remember This*, that narrative would be dissected, animating the past by undercutting any assumptions that it was less contradictory or bewildering than the present.

The through-line of Longworth's work is her skill for not only untangling myth from reality, but also interrogating the cultural conditions that led to the creation of the myth – and using the contours of myth to do so. "I love a rise and fall," she says. "I love a three-act narrative."

There's a noise from the house. Longworth goes inside to check it out, but it turns out to not be a ghostly visitation. It's just her salad being delivered from Sweetgreen.

IF LONGWORTH'S LIFE were a movie, it would be hard to tell what genre it would be. A sardonic, self-aware tragedy? A coming-of-age dark comedy? Here are the facts: she grew up in Studio City, California, at a time when, she says, "Every Starbucks was filled with half-employed screenwriters who'd talk about what it used to be like to work at Mary Tyler Moore's studios. At 13, you could just get a mocha, and sit and listen."

Longworth was inclined to. She grew up with an accountant dad, a mum who was "sort of an artist, but mostly a housewife," and the so-close-so-far feeling endemic to the Valley. When she was a kid, her mum took her to all the re-releases of the Disney films, but didn't pretend that life was a fairy tale. "I definitely saw my mother chafing against expectations and being depressed and wanting to do something outside the home, but not really knowing what it was," says Longworth. When she was 11 and her little sister was four, their mother killed herself. Their father – British and stiff-upper-lipped – was "overwhelmed" as a single parent. Of this period, Longworth says, "I had a hard time making friends and just being a person in the world."

Junior high was a turning point. Kurt Cobain was singing about Frances Farmer. David Lynch was channelling Alfred Hitchcock and Federico Fellini. By the time Longworth started high school, she had fallen in with a group of friends for whom "it was important to go see movies from the 60s and 70s. You were supposed to have seen things like *Easy Rider* or *2001*." She took to reading the old-movie listings in the back of *TV Guide*: "I knew that Myrna Loy was a thing before I had ever seen a Myrna Loy movie."

Longworth left home as soon as she could, first for the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, then the San Francisco Art Institute, where she studied experimental film and began making videos that mashed up autobiography with film analysis. Her thesis was about "this probably apocryphal story that Judy Garland had an affair with Frank Sinatra, that I was also loosely connecting to my own [breakup]."

When no one knew what to make of this, she decamped to NYU for a master's in cinema studies. She helped set the tone of the early blogosphere, writing reviews for sites like Cinematical, which eventually landed her the job of film critic at *LA Weekly* in 2010. She had thought it would be a dream job; instead, she

FROM LEFT: MONDADORI/GETTY IMAGES; EUGENE ROBERT RICHEE/JOHN KOBAL FOUNDATION/GETTY IMAGES; © WALT DISNEY PICTURES/EVERETT COLLECTION; WARNER BROS./GETTY IMAGES; HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

found it stifling to have to have an instant "take" on everything.

Longworth pivoted to teaching at Chapman University in Orange County. She wrote a few books. Then, in 2014, she thought that making a podcast could maybe open doors, even help her get a job at Turner Classic Movies. Over the spring break, she taught herself GarageBand and recorded her first episode. She was surprised when, only three or four episodes in, *Entertainment Weekly* mentioned *You Must Remember This*. Once the semester ended, she began doing the podcast full time. "She has an incredible ability to see the big picture and also know exactly what detail brings it to life, and makes you understand exactly what happened," says her friend Amy Nicholson, who took over as film critic at *LA Weekly*. "You just feel like if she's interested in something, there's a reason it's interesting."

Once Longworth decides on a subject, she turns to Google, reading everything she can and then using it to direct her to books, biographies and contemporaneous sources: magazines, studio correspondence, telegrams, blind items. With the help of her research and production assistant, she organises information into a timeline ("I can only think chronologically"), sometimes colour coding what she thinks she'll use. A single episode can take her months to research and prepare.

"She is the most disciplined writer I've ever met," says Johnson, who has known Longworth since 2009, when she moderated a Q&A for his film *The Brothers Bloom*. "And with any of the topics that she explores, she always finds a personal, emotional way into it." For Longworth, that way in is the point: "If I can humanise anybody who makes movies to the extent that it makes people want to watch the movies, and then the movies help them understand themselves better, that's the ultimate goal."

CHOOSING WHERE to dine with Longworth is a Hollywood history lesson in and of itself. There's Musso and Frank, the steakhouse where Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford started United Artists. There's the Chateau Marmont, where John Belushi fatally overdosed. There's Dear John's, where Sinatra and his crew hung out. Longworth had even recommended my hotel, the Hollywood Roosevelt, where Marilyn Monroe and Montgomery Clift had been posthumously sighted; according to her, it is famously haunted.

Eventually, though, she admits that going to Old Hollywood establishments can feel to her like "cosplay". As she puts it, "People sometimes have this idea that I'm wearing a vintage dress all the time. I'm not Dita Von Teese." In the end, we decide on Silver Lake's Cafe Stella, about which she had texted there would "probably be someone that is famous from a streaming show". There isn't, but our pavement table does have a distant view of the Hollywood sign, the "H" of which actress Peg Entwistle had thrown herself off in 1932 when her part in a film was cut from 16 minutes to four, as I'd learned while listening to Episode 93 in my haunted hotel.

Longworth is not Dita Von Teese, but there is something anachronistic about her, even if she no longer wears cat-eye glasses and sharp bobs. She's got a fairly bookish quality in person, but after a glass or two of Bordeaux, the lines between the actual Longworth and her dishy podcast persona blur. the *You Must Remember This* version does not seem like a character she's playing so much as a slightly heightened version of who she is, if with more precise and clipped diction. "I have more of a Valley Girl voice when I'm not speaking in front of a microphone," she says.

She is also more of a realist than her subject matter might suggest.

"I definitely saw my mother chafing against expectations and being depressed and wanting to do something outside the home, but not really knowing what it was"

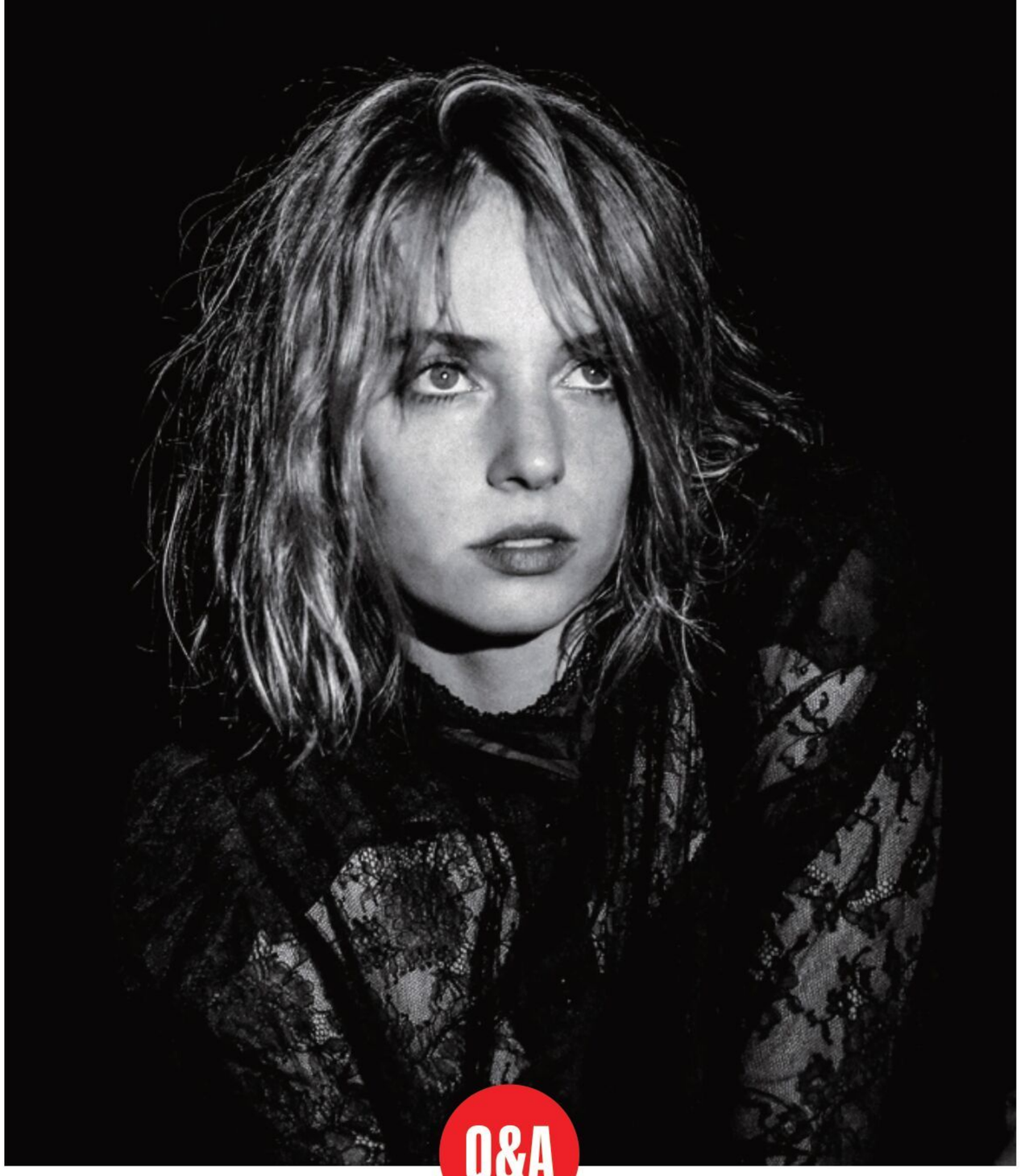
If so much of Old Hollywood exists in this "hazy space of smoke and wish fulfilment," as an episode on Garland attests, Longworth resists falling prey to nostalgia by baldly commenting on its appeal. She frequently pits accounts against each other, examines her own misconceptions, teases out which sources are likely to be more credible, and then highlights when the answers fail to reveal themselves. "Most of the time it's like looking for a needle in a haystack – and understanding what that needle looks like," she says of her research. "You are making choices. What if in a moment I was tired and didn't see the most important thing?"

And it's possible that the most important thing just doesn't exist anymore. "Los Angeles is very good at erasing its own history," she says as night falls. "It's the same impulse that caused the film industry to set movies on fire, to melt them down, to save the silver nitrate, which is why most silent films are lost." *You Must Remember This* acknowledges that this sense of loss is as much a part of the landscape as anything. "There's a loneliness to Los Angeles. There's a lot of isolation here," Longworth says.

Just as the best movies reveal something of the human condition, Longworth's work helps her explore something of her own self. Her most poignant season may be 2017's "Dead Blondes," which explores the lives of stars from Marilyn Monroe to Veronica Lake – and our fascination with their tragic ends. It's the season she wrote after her father's death from cancer.

"It was really, really hard for me," Longworth had told me earlier. "I didn't connect it at the time, but as soon as the season was over, it was so obvious to me that it was my grief season." She can see why the past beckons to her, why she's made a career "thinking about the ways that the people left behind deal with the legacy".

But the past doesn't make that easy. Even revived, the ghosts hold on to their secrets. Longworth doesn't begrudge them. "I wish I believed more that the line between life and death was porous," she says. "But I don't." ®



Q&A

Maya Hawke

The Stranger Things *star on her new album, wanting to die (onscreen), and which of her parents' movies she hasn't seen*

BY ANGIE MARTOCCIO

IF YOU WANT *Stranger Things* spoilers, don't ask Maya Hawke. "I'm of no use there," the 24-year-old confidently says on Zoom, from a house her mum, Uma Thurman, rented in Sag Harbor, New York. "My character doesn't have a ton of spoil-y story points. I'm comic relief." Hawke – whose father is Ethan Hawke – plays Robin Buckley, the charming, closeted band geek who fends off monsters with her sidekick Steve Harrington (Joe Keery). But when she's not saving the town of Hawkins, Hawke is also a musician with a lush new folk album, *Moss*. "All I really want out of a record is permission to make another one," she says. "I just want people to like it enough."

You're releasing this album on the heels of the latest season of *Stranger Things*. Do you usually work at this quick pace?
You're talking to someone who was just like [whiny voice], "I need a vacation!" But I have a super-overactive brain. I have an anxious desire to prove myself that will never go away, so I always want to be working harder and doing more than my perceived opponent that doesn't exist.

Does that need to prove yourself come from being the daughter of two celebrities?
I feel like the only way to handle the nepotism thing – which definitely gives you massive advantages in this life – is, you will get chances for free, but they will not be infinite; so you have to keep working and do a good job. If you do a bad job, the chances will stop.

Your single 'Thérèse' was inspired by Balthus' painting *Thérèse Dreaming*, which depicts a young girl suggestively sitting, exposing her underwear. Your video for the song shows you in an orgy in a forest, getting arrested by the cops. How did the painting bleed into the video?
Something about that triggered a feeling in me about prepubescent sexuality, and curiosity that existed in daydreams in your bed and in games you'd play with your friends that were fundamentally safe ways of exploring your sexuality. Then puberty comes and your sexuality doesn't belong to you anymore; it belongs to the world. It becomes this weapon you possess as a young female. But that wasn't your choice; that's society saying you've got a gun in your pocket and you've got to protect it. My emotional reaction to the painting felt connected to that. It's about the viewer and the creator, not about the girl. I wanted to make it about the girl again, both in my own life and in the song.

You were topless in the video, which seemed to be something people focused a lot of attention on.
I had one dark moment where I switched the YouTube comments from top comments to most recent and started reading really hateful things. I got so upset. Then I was like, 'Maya, you made this because people are upset by this kind of thing and you don't think that they should be. So, what? You think everyone's going to like it? If everyone liked it, then it wouldn't need to exist at all.' So I put myself to sleep doing some kind of smile meditation through that feeling.

You wrote about moss on your previous record, on 'River Like You': *"I tame the moss on the rocks."* What does the plant signify to you?
That's so cool that you noticed that. Classically, a rolling stone gathers no moss, right? I've always been confused about that metaphor. In the arts, being a rolling stone – always moving, being a lone wolf – is celebrated. I think my generation is different. We're more interested in nature walks and staying alive and saving the planet than we are in staying up till 4am on some kind of bender. The pandemic brought everyone to that place of 'Wow, I'm going to lose my mind unless I figure out how to take care of myself while sitting still.' This was a pandemic record, and I called [it] *Moss* because it felt like emotions that were gathered while sitting still.

The last season of *Stranger Things* was filmed a while ago. What was it like to sit on the show's secrets for so long?
There have been dramas about people spoiling things at press events, but no one seems to press me very hard on it. I've never got any angry calls from Netflix.

Millie Bobby Brown said that the Duffer Brothers need to start killing characters as the cast is so large. Do you agree?
Well, it's the last season, so people are probably going to die. I would love to die and get my hero's moment. I'd love to die with honour, as any actor would.

Have you seen *Reality Bites*? Winona Ryder is in it... with your dad.
I haven't. I know Winona pretty well, and I'm a giant fan of her work and of my dad's work, but there are holes in having watched my parents' movies. Some of those movies feel like such a big deal that we'd all want to sit down and watch them together, but it's rarely the right time where everyone's like, "Let's get together and watch my movies!" I hadn't seen *Pulp Fiction* until a couple years ago. I still haven't seen one of the *Kill Bill* movies. I've got some big holes. ®

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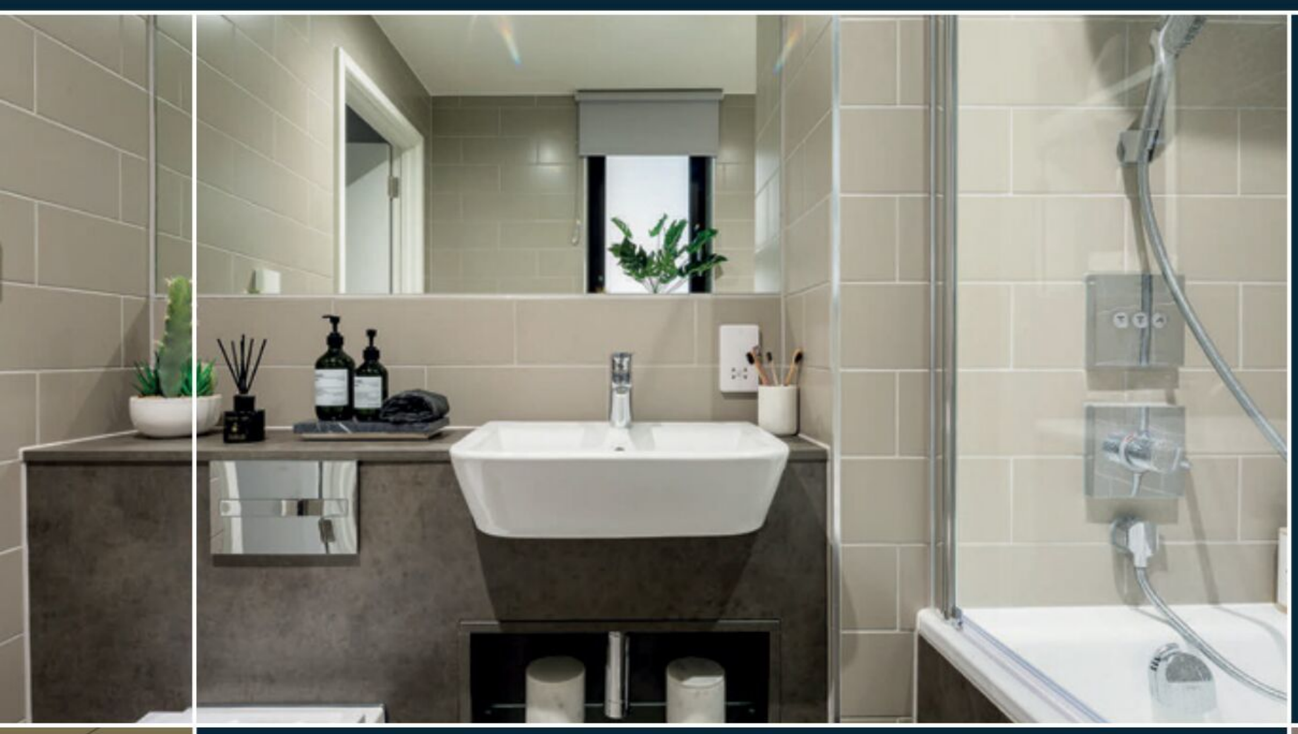

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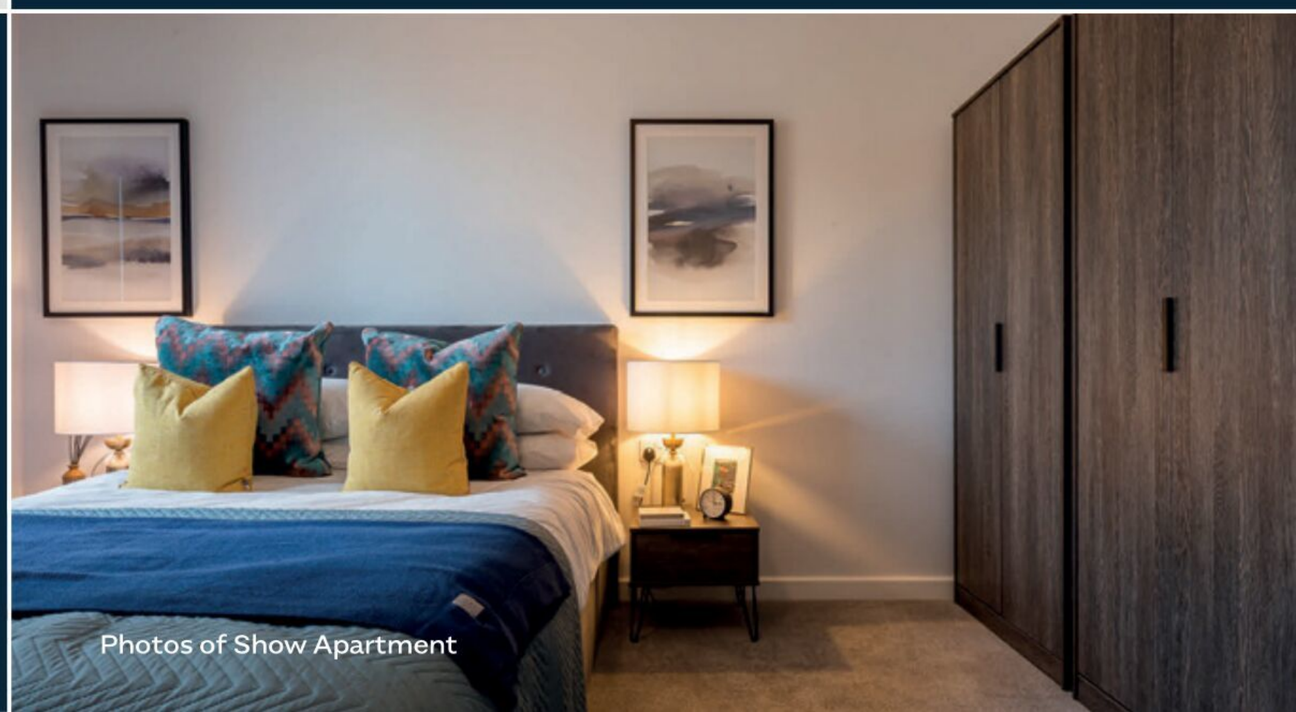

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Time to put our house in order

Housing campaigner Kwajo Tweneboa on why disrepair and poor living conditions in the UK's rental and social housing sectors is an issue that can no longer be ignored

DISREPAIR IN THE HOUSING SECTOR is a major issue which has been underestimated and ignored for decades, leaving occupants to live in slum conditions. According to YouGov research released last year, 3.2 million (39 per cent) of private tenants say that they have been forced to live in dangerous or unhealthy homes for fear of eviction if they complain, while the government's English Housing Survey revealed that more than half a million social homes in England fail to meet basic health and safety standards. And things are getting worse. It's the most serious issue facing tenants in the UK and is a result of the current housing crisis, as well as the lack of significant government policy.

The concept of disrepair is defined as the poor state of a building, home or structure due to neglect. For most of my life it has been something I've experienced first-hand. My family and I have lived in social housing for many years. We started out in temporary accommodation, which was quite literally a badly converted car garage. Then, in 2018, we moved into a home not fit for human habitation. Filled with mice, cockroaches, damp and mould, its kitchen was very old, and it had a bathroom which couldn't be used.

This was the same home where my dad was bed-bound and received medical treatment while battling stage 4 oesophageal cancer. The most distressing part was that we had been complaining to our landlord about the state of our home and they were aware he was terminally sick with cancer. Like many social housing tenants across the country, we were ignored. His voice was never heard, and I was determined that for the sake of my family and millions of others across the UK, that wouldn't continue. Nobody should have to live in such appalling conditions, let alone those who are suffering from terminal illnesses or those who are vulnerable. Nearly 18 months after my father died in January 2020, in May last year I tweeted photos of our home (see overleaf). This prompted a visit from ITV News to see for themselves. It was only after their report was broadcast in June 2021 that repairs were finally carried out to our home and others on the estate.

"We started out in temporary accommodation – a badly converted garage"

As people have learned of my story, over the past year or so, they have reached out to me for help. As a result, I have visited thousands of social tenants living in accommodation that is in a state of disrepair. I now want to help others in the same situation my family was in and to bring about change.

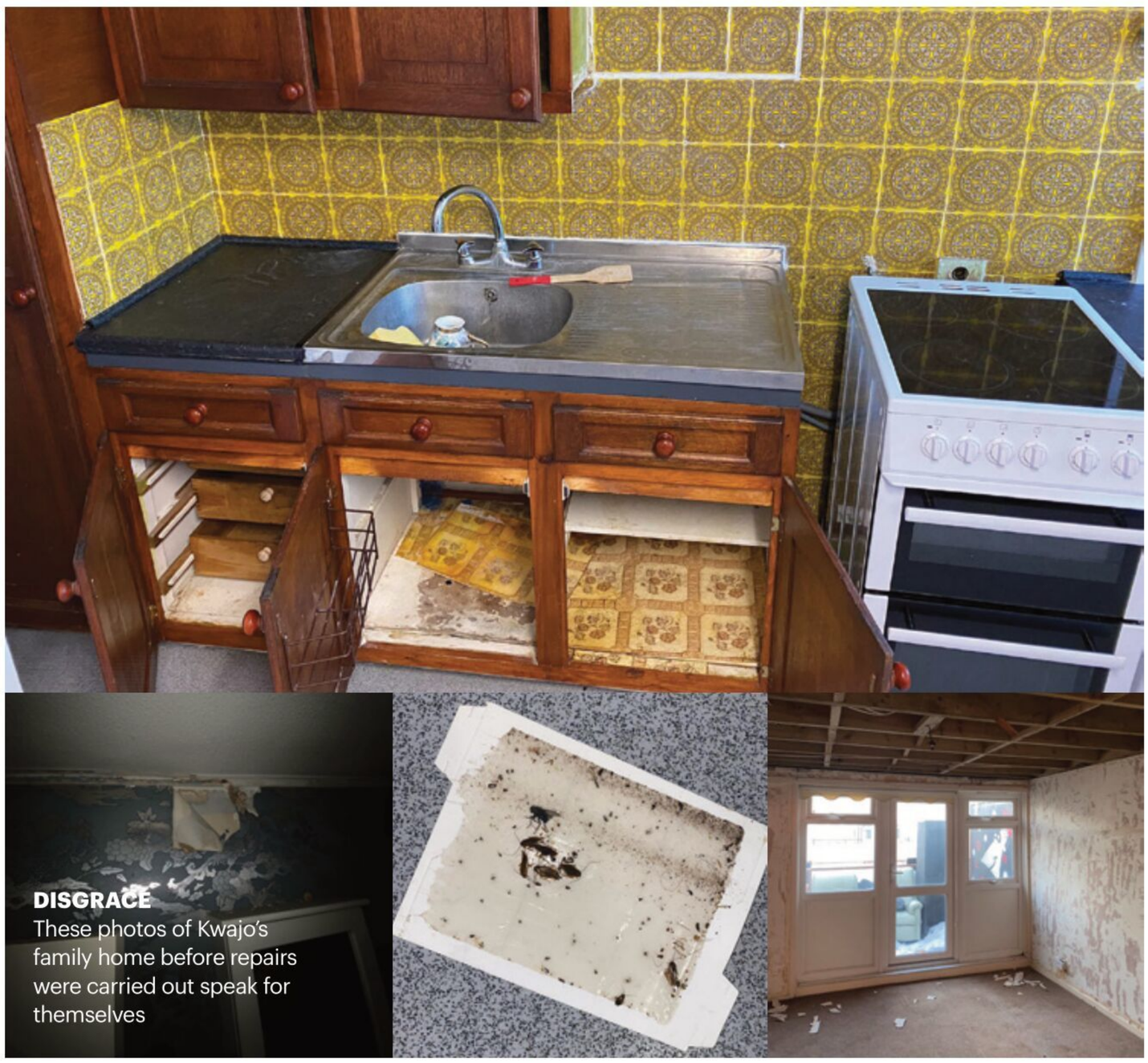
Strong regulation in both the public and private housing sectors has been non-existent for decades. This, coupled with successive governments turning a blind eye to both sectors' decline over many years, has been the driving force behind the current crisis.

Social housing is run either by not-for-profit housing associations or local councils who provide homes that can be let at a discount. They exist to house those who can't afford to rent or to buy a property on the open market. They're often built using funding from the government and rents paid by tenants.

It's fair to say that maintaining and building more social housing in the UK isn't and hasn't been a government priority for generations. Shelter has noted that over a 35-year period after the Second World War, local authorities and housing associations built 4.4 million social homes at an average of more than 126,000 a year. But recent figures from Shelter show that, in England, there are now 1.4 million fewer households in social housing than there were in 1980 and last year, 29,000 social homes were sold or demolished, with less than 7,000 built – leaving us in a deficit. Nowhere near enough for the 1.1 million people on the waiting list for this kind of housing. This consistent lack of focus and investment in social housing has resulted in tenants being on the receiving end, often living in properties not fit for human habitation while still being expected to pay rent to live in them.

In 2017, one of the worst incidents in housing history occurred: the Grenfell disaster. Immediately afterwards, Grenfell tenants and relatives of the dead said that their concerns about the building's safety had been ignored.

ISTOCK/ LAURENE PINEAU-TAYLOR



DISGRACE
These photos of Kwajo's family home before repairs were carried out speak for themselves

Yet the change in social housing that was meant to take place as a result did not happen.

In February this year, ITV News revealed shocking findings after looking into sub-standard social housing. Michael Gove, the then Housing Secretary, said in response: "One of the things that everyone pledged to do [after Grenfell] was to make sure that people in social housing had their voices heard, and we haven't done that effectively."

ITV's report backs up what tenants I have spoken to say time and time again: that they are ignored at multiple levels when they complain, something I too experienced. Recently, a housing association tenant who had been complaining for seven years about damp and mould, as well as living with mice for around 10 years, told me their complaints have been ignored and never dealt with. Their hallway ceiling had collapsed on the day I arrived, and when they phoned their provider to notify them, they were told they had no records of any complaints from the family, leaving them in complete despair.

Lessons were supposed to be learned from the Grenfell disaster, but from what I've seen the situation is just as bad now as it was five years ago.

I have often argued that housing, healthcare and education are the three pillars that are essential for everyone in society. According to American psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), housing and shelter is a fundamental essential we require in order to reach our full potential. Those without are put at a disadvantage compared to those with safe and stable homes.

Children living in squalid accommodation and their education needs are often the overlooked victims of the housing crisis. It is believed disrepair is an even bigger issue in the private sector. According to Shelter, there are 1.7 million children in owner-occupied homes who are living in bad housing, while approximately 845,000 children in the private rental sector are having to put up with sub-standard accommodation. With even less regulation and no housing ombudsman, tenants living in disrepair often fend for themselves and are in some cases fearful to raise concerns in case they lose the roof over their heads altogether, as outlined at the beginning of this article.

"Housing, healthcare and education are the three pillars essential for everyone in society"

I recently visited a private tenant who reached out for my help via social media whose home had been flooded for days with raw sewage from the block of flats where he lives after it erupted through his toilet and shower. It destroyed his belongings and even his bedroom. He wasn't compensated for his property, and when the landlord did decide to respond after my visit, the tenant was asked to pack what was left of his belongings and move out so that the flat could be left empty instead of being repaired.

The housing crisis, and disrepair in particular, seems to be only exacerbated by the growing cost-of-living crisis, which is disproportionately affecting poorer households, leaving many struggling to pay their bills let alone rent. With benefits failing to rise with inflation, it's those who are worse off who are being hit the hardest. For some, it's impossible to make their finances stretch. Government figures have revealed that as the cost-of-living crisis has developed, 3,405 households in the private rented sector were evicted by bailiffs in England between April and June 2022 – up 39 per cent on the previous quarter. Over the past few months, I have not just been asked for support with disrepair, but also for financial advice and support for tenants who are struggling with the economic turmoil.

Housing providers have stated that they too are feeling the pinch. Ultimately, the effects will be passed down to tenants who are already struggling. At the end of August this year, the government began a six-week consultation on a plan to introduce a one-year social housing rent cap from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 to ease the impact of the crisis on the most vulnerable tenants. But social housing providers have said the proposed cap would mean tens of billions of pounds less would then be invested in social housing stock at a time of rising public concern about safety and living standards on some estates.

The National Housing Federation commented, "We are very concerned that a new cap on social housing rent increases will significantly impact on housing providers' ability to provide critical services for residents and invest in new and existing homes." With this crisis set to continue for many months if not years, the downward trajectory of the housing crisis will see conditions in homes worsen and the lives of millions become a lot more difficult.

With worrying concerns being voiced by providers regarding their inability to guarantee future support for tenants when it comes to repairs and safety, and more than five years on since Grenfell, the public is looking to future political leaders for answers and solutions to a crisis affecting millions across the country. The year continues and my social media notifications are increasing, with desperate tenants across the country needing my help with housing. As despair and worry grows, tenants will now be asking questions of potential future governments and demanding systemic change once and for all.

KWAJO TWENEBOA

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25ml freshly squeezed lemon juice
12.5ml sugar syrup
12.5ml Crème de Mure

Add the Blackberry Gin, lemon juice and sugar syrup to a cocktail shaker and shake with ice until chilled. Strain into an old fashion rocks glass filled with crushed ice. Drizzle the Crème de Mure over the ice and garnish with a lemon wheel and fresh blackberries.

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The Rolling Stone UK 2022 Awards

As we mark one year of Rolling Stone UK with our inaugural awards issue, we celebrate the stand-out names in music, film and TV from the UK and Ireland who have elevated their artistry — and their medium — to new heights

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TV AWARD

TOP GIRL

Known predominantly for her Mercury Prize-winning and commercially successful music, Little Simz is a force of nature. In a world of content and noise, the semi-mysterious Simbiatu Ajikawo lets her talent speak for her. In this interview, our TV Award-winner talks about how she came to act in British cultural export *Top Boy* and her experience filming the show

simz

BY TSHEPO MOKOENA
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KOSMAS PAVLOS
FASHION BY JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

PREVIOUS PAGE: LITTLE SIMZ WEARS LEATHER COAT AND SHIRT BY PRADA, EARRINGS BY PAWNSHOP LONDON

THIS PAGE: LITTLE SIMZ WEARS JUMPSUIT, SHIRT AND TIE BY GUCCI, GLOVES BY ADIDAS X GUCCI, RINGS AND EARRINGS BY PAWNSHOP LONDON, SUNGLASSES BY MOSCOT

IT SEEMS THERE'S been a miscommunication. Simbiatu Ajikawo and I are not sitting in a booth at one of her favourite restaurants in London, as I'd been told. The 28-year-old actor and rapper, who you may know better as Little Simz, picks up the menu. She squints at it a little. Has she got a regular? "From here?" She looks up to meet my eye, slightly confused. "Err," and after a long pause: "No, not a regular." Once we order – fish with a prawn starter, and a passionfruit mocktail for her – I ask if lines were crossed, to place us in this fairly nondescript, "Caribbean-inspired" establishment co-founded by two white men.

Yes, there may have been a mix-up. "It's a cool spot, though," she offers, diplomatically. "But favourites? I don't know," accompanied by a slight frown. To be clear, Ajikawo's preferred place to eat is Enish, in Finchley, north London. Their Nigerian fare is, to Ajikawo, "just really authentic; it feels like home, so I like going there." Now, she smiles. We're meeting right after the photoshoot, so she sits across from me in full, stunning makeup and a relaxed fleece zipped right up to the neck.

The sound of horns on a chirpy, reggae instrumental blare out from speakers above our heads. Besides her publicist, her security and the staff, we're the only people in here. It's late afternoon, in the lull between lunch and dinner services. Before Ajikawo arrived, I'd tried to find us the quietest table, and asked staff to turn the music down. "This is as low as it goes," a young waiter had said, after double-checking. Fair enough.

But Ajikawo notices it, too. She's powering down after the intensity of the shoot. And, as will become a theme when thinking about how she behaves professionally, she's hyper-aware of our surroundings. We're just about to start talking about the Mercury Prize awards that nearly didn't happen.

They were first scheduled for 8 September, one of those autumn days in London where the sky hangs low before darkening into a sudden downpour. She was nominated for 2021's *Sometimes I Might Be Introvert*, feeling "really excited for the day, in the way that award show days go, you know? You do your dress rehearsal, you go to the hotel, you get ready; you take your time. You put your songs on, and you gear up for it"– but then she interrupts herself. "Should we ask them to turn this down?" Soon, she has her security guy on it: "Let's get them to try and turn it down, the music," she shouts over to him. "There's no one in here!" Ajikawo giggles. She's right. And he does a much better job than I did – we soon get silence. Right, where were we? "I was getting ready, I had my outfit on."

A couple of hours earlier, news had broken that Queen Elizabeth II was under medical supervision at Balmoral, with members of the family on their way to see her. Ajikawo was in the middle of her usual pre-event ritual. She always cleans her teeth before heading out. Mid-brush, her manager Tilla Acré called, "saying: 'It's locked. Everything's off, everything's cancelled.'" The Queen had died. No Mercurys. Instead, the start of a period of national mourning.

In the end, Ajikawo spent the bizarre evening with family at her hotel. They detoured on their way to the venue, "and we ordered food and kicked it" in her room instead. It was like a sudden plummet from adrenaline to shock. "Yeah, it's like you build yourself up and then..." She raises her arms up, before dropping them. "But it is what it is, you know? I guess that's life, innit? It happened to fall on that day, but it's all good. Everything for a reason; it just wasn't meant to be that day." Her whole attitude is extremely zen when things don't go her way, and zen when they do – she went on to win the 2022 Mercury Prize when the awards were finally staged in October.

There's a calm to Ajikawo, noted often in press promoting her last album (and by me, when we first met, in 2019). She sets her mind on something, then moves towards it, without fanfare. You see that in how she gets security to silence this place, in how she asserts herself on the shoot (more on that later). And it's clear in how she's stepped into the character of Shelley on Netflix's *Top Boy* reboot. She seemed to casually move into acting, having built a career as a rapper for more than a decade. But the real story's not that simple. As she picks up Rolling Stone UK's Television Award, is she likely to sit back, satisfied with her accomplishments so far? Not quite.

"It just wasn't meant to be that day"

BEFORE YOU GET any ideas, she won't be drawn on the plot for the next, and final, season of *Top Boy*. "This season I was definitely stretched," she begins. She wanted "to make sure I gave Shelley her due diligence and did everything in my power to make sure she goes out the right way. However, that" – then cuts herself off – "you'll see it anyway." All she'll offer now is a smile. Season two saw single mum Shelley grow even closer to titular top boy, Dushane Hill (played by Ashley Walters). The season closed with a major twist. Something to make people gasp. As much as Ajikawo loved seeing fans online react in real time, she scrunches up her face saying one word: spoilers.

"I've always thought," and she kisses her teeth, "'Just chill.' I understand the excitement for it, but let people enjoy it at their pace." She'd tweeted as much, in March, when the season dropped in full ("lol yo chilllll on the spoilers"). "People wait so long for it, that to go, 'I'm gonna tell you the end plot' when it's just dropped, is a bit..." her voice trails

GUCCI

“I can use my body in different ways and step outside my comfort zone”

THIS PAGE: LITTLE SIMZ WEARS TOP BY ATSUKO KUDO, EARRINGS AND RINGS BY PAWNSHOP LONDON

OPPOSITE: LITTLE SIMZ WEARS JACKET BY MOSCHINO, LEATHER TROUSERS BY ALBERTA FERRETTI, BOOTS BY ALEXANDER MCQUEEN, RINGS AND EARRINGS BY PAWNSHOP LONDON

off into nothing. But, she sums up, "That's the internet." It's one of the few times talking about *Top Boy* when she looks irritated. Back to her zen state, she brushes it off.

Mostly, she enjoys being able to discuss her acting rather than only her music. When I ask how she knew she could act as a child, she stops. "No one's ever asked me that before. I don't know!" I prod, offering up stories of my failed attempts to break into acting at a similar age. "I just felt like, 'Yeah, I can embody different people. I can use my body in different ways, and step outside of both myself and my comfort zone.' And I actually enjoy it."

It's like flexing a different muscle. As Little Simz, she's in charge. It's her vision, accelerated by her ideas. She is, after all, a solo artist. She built a career from freestyling as a teen and self-releasing mixtapes to winning awards – she also won a Brit in February – with that singular drive. Being part of a franchise took some getting used to. "It's like a football team: everyone's coming together to make this thing work. You've got to have trust in your teammates," she says. Sometimes, when they're doing press as a cast and she can't quite come up with the right line, she'll turn to Walters or Jasmine Jobson (Jaq), as if to say: "Help me out." She and Walters have clicked since her audition. The prompt? For him to make her laugh. "And he did – that was it. It was super quick and simple," she says. She remembers them laughing, shooting and re-shooting a sad scene from season two with Marsha Millar (who plays Pat, Dushane's mum). When she describes the story, it's so clearly loaded with in-jokes that I barely understand why it was hilarious. But she's beaming. You had to be there.

Shooting season three has been bittersweet, she says. Ajikawo wrapped her scenes a couple of weeks ago: "There's an element of letting go of that part of you." But it's also taught her about her limits, and about what feels good on set. "We worked with two incredible actor-directors this time around as well" – she won't share their names because she's "not sure" she's allowed to yet. "And they really cared about performance as opposed to... aesthetic, and how it looks."

She chooses these words carefully, slowly. Rather, this duo understood how to concentrate on how a scene *felt*. They knew how to see things from both sides of the lens. "Sometimes, if I'm doing a scene that requires me to go somewhere emotional, I ain't got 30 takes in me to do that. Working with people who understand your capacity and what you can handle on any given day, is a blessing, for sure," she explains.

Earlier in the day, I watch her navigate the photographer's vision in a similar way. She's wearing an electric-blue Gucci boilersuit and Adidas accessories. Quiet, determined, focused on every shot. The photographer yells encouragement at her, as she contorts her body: crouching, kneeling, then standing. At one point she roars, staring down the lens. Later, we'll joke that Tyra Banks was right on *America's Next Top Model*, about poses feeling weird but translating beautifully on camera. Even so, as the photographer clicks away, a member of Ajikawo's team passes her message onto her publicist: this will be the last look. The information is relayed to Rolling Stone UK's fashion director. Ajikawo is firm. Later, she'll say she's become "very protective of myself. I'm big on boundaries right now." Maybe she hadn't been before.

Does that mean she was pushed too far on other sets? "Not so much with acting," she begins, but it can be tricky when having her picture taken. "You want me to shoot 20 looks today? I... I can't," even though she'd love to in principle. She's learning to set limits. "When it comes to working with people on set, especially women, I feel like there's a duty of care," she says. "Everyone who gets photographed should be asked: 'What makes you feel comfortable? What makes you feel safe?' We're using our bodies; that's a vulnerable space to be in."

I can see how Ajikawo has changed over the years. When she was younger, she was quicker to smile to put others at ease in interviews. Then, she had more to prove in a male-dominated industry where her world-building on EPs and mixtapes bucked chart trends. She seems to know herself better now. Her voice is direct, almost biting at times. She

“I’ve become very protective of myself...

LITTLE SIMZ WEARS LEATHER COAT, SHIRT AND TROUSERS BY PRADA, BOOTS BY KENZO, EARRINGS, RINGS AND NECKLACE BY PAWNSHOP LONDON

'... I'm big on boundaries right now'

"I just want to do things that I enjoy, man"

THIS PAGE: LITTLE SIMZ WEARS SUIT, SHIRT AND COAT BY LOUIS VUITTON, BOOTS BY JIMMY CHOO, RINGS AND EARRINGS BY PAWNSHOP LONDON

OPPOSITE: LITTLE SIMZ WEARS JUMPSUIT BY GUCCI, GLOVES AND TRAINERS BY ADIDAS X GUCCI, RINGS AND EARRINGS BY PAWNSHOP LONDON, SUNGLASSES BY MOSCOT

knows people on set are "checking for their jobs and whatnot, but I'm also trying to get in the zone. I'd rather not have 10 people look at me while I'm doing it."

AJIKAWO WAS ALWAYS quiet. "When I was young, I didn't really talk much. Like, I wasn't a mute but I wasn't outspoken," she remembers. Even so, as many already know, she went to the Anna Scher Theatre school in north London, and Mary's Youth Club in Islington. As a teen, she starred in CBBC's *Spirit Warriors* and E4's *Youngers*. Her older sister, who'd also acted, got her both jobs. "She started her own agency and took me under her wing, put me up for stuff, got me auditions" – and protected her baby sister in the process. "When you're young, you can get fed to the wolves. But my sister's my sister before anything, you know? So you can't talk to me any kind of way," she says. Having that family support, from both her sister and her mother, propelled her forward.

A quiet child, she's the same now. She chuckles recounting how little she speaks on the *Top Boy* set. "I don't know if people think I'm rude or anti-social — I'm just super-quiet. I'm focused, I'm working, I'm doing my thing." That's just how she is. Today, she often nods, and lets out a stream of encouraging "yeah, yeahs" while I speak. "I like to listen, and observe, and ask questions. Just take things in. But every time that gets flipped on its head, I'm like, 'Whoa, whoa, whoa – this is not how it works.'" Interviews can feel odd as a result. She's happy to chat, polite, but cautious, too. She warms up, though, when talking about how she wants to grow as an actor: "For me, the idea is to be stretched, and not repetitive." And she hopes to hold the door open for other Black women, too. "I ain't gotta do every role," she says, laughing. She'd love to do action, something she'd need to train for, and has a few scripts on her desk at the moment. "What I want is to do projects that I'm moved by, that I'm inspired by; that challenge me," she says, looking just beyond my eyes. "I just want to do things that I enjoy, man. I think life's too short." Viola Davis, Denzel Washington and Cicely Tyson are among some of the names of people she looks up to, when put on the spot.

As our time wraps, we rattle through the books and TV we've been into lately. Ajikawo reads a lot, pulling out a highlighter to slash across passages she'll want to signpost to her future self. She's heavy on reading philosophical self-help at the moment and shouts out M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Travelled*. "It felt like it was written *for me*." Her partner had recommended it to her, and she only realised she already owned it (with different cover art) once she'd finished it. "His segment on love, and on what the definition of it means – if there is one..." she trails off again, but it stuck with her. Peck described love as, she says, "the act or will to nurture your growth, or someone else's". And that resonated. Now, she's wading through *The Way of Zen* by Alan Watts – "very difficult book to read. I have to read it in *silence*," she says, smiling.

It's not all philosophy, though. She watches *Curb Your Enthusiasm* to unwind, and *Love Island* when it's on. I recommend she adds *Abbott Elementary* to the roster, and she sounds excited to give it a try. Before she goes, she mentions she's got a coffee table book coming out. One filled with photos, art, scribbles from her journals, and interviews – "it's not my life story, or an autobiography. That's not the vibe." She sounds delighted, recalling an interview she did with Dr Karen Joash, "a Black woman who works in the NHS and private healthcare. It's cool that I can sit down, having conversations with people like her, and actually *learn*."

As for the music? Again she won't be drawn on detail. I ask if she's writing a new album. "Could be." A chuckle. "There will be more to come eventually." But she's keeping that to herself. "I'm a public figure, in a way, but I'm a private person. I also think people value mystery. You don't have to share everything, you know? Or you stagger it. I might share stuff that I'm going through now in 20 years," she says.

Ajikawo refuses to give everything away, to be the type to be very online or a wide-open book. "I give a lot of myself, but I still have some stuff for me. I need to," she says. That may well be how we ended up in the neutral territory of this restaurant. That's part of the allure with Little Simz, the artist and actor: unless you're in her inner circle, you can never really know for sure. ®

HAIR BY CHANTELLE FULLER, MAKEUP BY NIBRAS USING YSL BEAUTY, PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT: LUKE JOHNSON, FASHION ASSISTANT: BETHAN DADSON

ARTIST OF THE YEAR

Yung

HOW TO WIN FANS AND INFLUENCE PEOPLE

Love him or hate him, Yungblud exemplifies what it means to be a Gen Z rock star. Dominic Harrison harnessed an influencer model to rise to fame but in 2022 proved he's well on the way to becoming a British pop culture icon. Rolling Stone UK goes on the road with our Artist of the Year to find out how he intends to use more than his high-energy persona to be taken seriously

blyg

BY HANNAH EWENS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KOSMAS PAVLOS
FASHION BY JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

PREVIOUS PAGE: BRACES AND JEWELLERY BY CHROME HEARTS
OPPOSITE: YUNGBLUD WEARS FAUX FUR COAT BY GANT, LEATHER TROUSERS BY ALTU AT MATCHESFASHION, SOCKS BY FALKE, SHOES BY UNDERGROUND, JEWELLERY BY CHROME HEARTS

WHILE DOMINIC HARRISON was unwinding with a pint in a bar in Portugal recently, a stray bloke from a stag do asked him if one of his mates could come over. Harrison, ever the people pleaser, said yes. The rest of the stag party went to bed drunk, but this friend came over and started drinking with the singer known to the world as Yungblud. "My wife is a big fan," he told Harrison, "but I think you're a bit of a dick." Harrison entertained this man and his monologue because he is used to interactions like this – a portion of the general public finds his animated persona irritating and something about his relentless enthusiasm invites what essentially amounts to abuse. Strangers speak to him as though he's a toddler or not really in the room. These scenarios in which Harrison plays unpaid therapist to his adversaries are why he must soon move from his home on Old Street, a siren call of a roundabout in London for people without respectful boundaries to gather: bankers, tourists and 20-somethings from Essex.

"I just don't know why you're always so fucking excited all the time, like on the telly," the man informed Harrison. "I don't believe it."

"I told him: I'm on the fucking telly, of course I'm excited," Harrison relays to me in his Yorkshire accent. "What would you do if you're on the telly and radio?"

You'd probably crank your personality up to 11, stretch your face into a grin and amplify each word: *Y'alright? I'm fucking Yungblud*. It's not an act, not really. The 25-year-old Harrison feels something close to mania to be living his dream. Ever since he was small, growing up in Doncaster with a dad and grandad who sold second-hand guitars to famous musicians, he wanted to be a performer. In his teens, he acted on *Emmerdale* and a Disney show. Since releasing his debut album on a major label in 2018, he has demonstrated a desire for the type of straightforward fame that can turn rock fans off, particularly anyone old enough to remember being able to make respectable money without befriending brands or becoming one yourself.

To say Yungblud has been a divisive presence in British pop culture over the past five years would be putting it more mildly than anything Harrison has said in his life. For all the hostility, there is the adoration, the fans who run up to him to overshare and worship. "Imagine walking down the street and everyone loves you or thinks you're a fucking c*nt and hates you," he says. "There's *hatred* for you. You sign up for it and then it happens and you're like... holy shit."

To elicit this sort of reaction, you have to be as distinctive and recognisable as the McDonald's logo. Yungblud looks like Beelzebub cast by Tim Burton, the Joker dressed in Hot Topic or Sid Vicious signed to a modelling agency. He is loud in every way and his messaging is neither subtle nor layered. He always wears pink socks to encourage his fans to do the same and posts black hearts online as a visual sign-off. Where other artists might focus on world-building or Easter eggs for fans, he is direct. If Busted or McFly played Britpop covers, you'd be close to a Yungblud album. As he readily admits, music has not been the most important part of what he does.

Yungblud followed an influencer business model to success. He exemplifies the way in which musicians must increasingly be social media creators before anything else. He had a meeting with Musical.ly before it was TikTok because he thought it was the future of music. "Look how big TikTok became. TikTok is like grunge to me. It's the same shit as when someone shaved their head for the first time with punk. It's just expression every time," he says, adding, "My whole career came from me looking into an iPhone." He follows TikTok trends online to see if there's something he can recreate and he does it. For example, he recently saw that the LA Western-themed bar Saddle Ranch was discovered by users of the app, so he went there and did a video on the mechanical bull, screaming at fans to buy tickets to his US tour. He has conversations with people younger than him, like Jxdn Hossler and Travis Barker's son Landon to understand how to keep growing his audience.

Not long ago, Harrison would wake up through the night to post on social media. He didn't trust anyone to care as much about his online engagement as him. "I'm not an industry plant, I'm in Japan, awake at 4am to post this video," he tells me. "But then I'm vibing – I'm still like: 'Sick, I'm in Japan. *Wow*.'" That changed a few months ago because of the global growth in his profile. His team expanded to a 35-strong crew and he has three different managers. His social media is now run in part by Jules, a 19-year-old who created the most followed Yungblud fan account. Finally, he says half-jokingly, someone who would understand the importance of waking up at 4am to post.

The idea of him cancelling a run of shows because he's exhausted is unthinkable (he sees his diagnosed ADHD as both a disadvantage and a superpower). His day-to-day tour manager explains how, after playing shows in Australia then flying to New York on a 23-hour round trip for pre-album promo, he woke up in the night and threw up from the jetlag. From there, they all went on to LA, then Amsterdam for two days and back to London for 24 hours, before going back to LA for 24 hours and then Japan. Join Harrison's team and you are told: don't try to keep up with him – you can't.

Through sheer force of turning up every day as Yungblud and working in this crazed manner, he proved he can no longer be ignored as a legitimate pop-rock contender. After being initially signed in the US, and feeling snubbed by the UK, Harrison's luck in his own country recently began to change. The first two albums were criticised for being sonically unremarkable and for clumsy lyrics that covered gender, sexual assault and mental health. But over the past 12 months, he's achieved ubiquitousness in the British mainstream media and is close to becoming a younger household name like Lewis Capaldi or Rita Ora. In an age where beige homegrown celebrities dominate our attention domestically, Yungblud as an entity is refreshing. That media presence and personality among neutered stars who never say – or embody – much of anything at all (he will take a stab at prejudice against trans people, homelessness, most pertinent issues) is notable.

His 2022 self-titled third album has altered the narrative around him on its own merit – it reached number one in the UK album chart (his second record to reach the top spot) and most reviewers were surprised. The verdict: *Yungblud* was... all right. He played a primetime slot this year at Glastonbury on the hallowed John Peel stage, which, to him, was evidence of his UK breakthrough.

"No one wanted to admit I was as big as I was and I will admit at times... bruv, it hurt, it got to me," Harrison says. "Without sounding wanky or self-important, Glasto felt like

“Glasto felt like retribution for me”

“I just say what’s true for me right now”

YUNGBLUD WEARS SHIRT, COAT AND TROUSERS BY ALEXANDER MCQUEEN, SOCKS BY FALKE, SHOES BY UNDERGROUND, BROOCH BY CHROME HEARTS

retribution for me. Two years ago, it felt like exactly the sort of place Yungblud shouldn't belong, but I so badly wanted to be a part of it."

Yungblud's strengths are obvious even if detractors ignore them. He consistently shines on collaborations: his tracks with Halsey ('11 Minutes') and Machine Gun Kelly ('I Think I'm Okay') are still two of the more memorable releases of this pop-punk revival. He has some of the most distinctive rock vocals of the century so far – gravelly, nasal, bratty; instantly him – and is a magnetic live performer, a Tazmanian devil of pop rock. When he gets to show off, to bounce around in the context of other people, he is in his element.

It only takes an hour with Harrison to realise he is impossibly likeable; it's how he turns haters into someone who spreads the gospel that he's a pretty sound guy. Or, if you're that man in Portugal, attending his show on Harrison's guest list the following night and messaging to say he loved it. He moves through the world as if he's Dale Carnegie road-testing *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Nothing stops his optimism – exasperating, overblown optimism that persists until it beats you into submission. Cynicism is just another form of hatred in the world he says he is here to combat. He is not a fighter but a "fucking hippy".

He starts calling me by a nickname and remembers inconsequential details from a conversation I had with him a year ago. He compliments the waitress on her earrings, thanks those who have done next to nothing for their kindness. The other day in Paris he met a sculptor and sat down with him for an hour to chat about his work and life ("I was like, 'Whoa, you're a sculptor, that's cool as fuck.' Fire! You know what I mean?"). If there is anyone in a room who could leave a Yungblud follower, he will convert that stranger into a fan. You will never know if it's conscious, shrewd behaviour and he would never believe you anyway if you told him that it was.

IT'S THE NIGHT before Yungblud is due to play Sacramento's Aftershock Festival. We're in a blacked-out car in San Francisco as Harrison worries that Roger Daltrey from The Who thinks he's a bit fake. Across the car seat between us and without being recorded, Harrison says that while they had a great conversation when they met a month ago, Daltrey seemed confused by how he was acting up to the photographer who was there to capture candid shots of the pair. He was performing, but his hero was chill, cool, unbothered.

When I turn my dictaphone on and ask him to explain further, he says, "It's hard for older generations to look in on new rock and understand what's going on and like it. Every iconic picture of Bowie, he's not looking at the camera, but you can't do that anymore. It's not another person's interpretation of a moment you were doing. You have to create a moment for yourself now."

What people don't know about him, he says, is that he's deeply insecure and for a famous communicator he's bad at communicating. "Being Yungblud has been a suit of armour for me, but that's not enough anymore. I need more, I owe my fans more. 'Yungblud' has just been the bridge for me to meet them," he says. His fans, he believes, need to know the 'real' him and they need to experience some of his real music. "I can seem confused because all I've got is my energy. I believe I'm so real but I don't step back to formulate an answer. I just say what's true for me right now." When you don't have communication skills to connect with people, your energy articulates for you, for better or for worse.

He takes us to Tosca Cafe, an Italian restaurant in the North Beach area. It's somewhere he's wanted to go for a while but hasn't had the opportunity. Inside, it's like the interior of his home, he remarks: dimly lit, romantic, warm. He orders a bottle of cabernet, rigatoni and a steak cooked medium for afterwards.

Back to the Daltrey conversation: Harrison feels extremely Gen Z himself and that's part of the problem of how he's perceived by older generations. "When I look at The 1975 and Arctic Monkeys, they're such a different generation to me," he says. "When they speak, they're profound now. I don't want to be profound yet, I want to be on the fucking tarmac, on the ground. I love Matty [Healy] and I love Alex [Turner] but I don't relate to them as much as I used to. They're older and it's all very serious." He lurches across the table and back again to demonstrate his comprehension of them. "I'm *there* and then I'm not. We're absolutely a generation apart, there's a big difference between us. Different brains, different way of communicating. Personally, I relate to Mac Miller, Billie Eilish, Lil Peep and Lil Nas X. That's where my head is at."

YUNGBLUD WEARS NECKLACE BY CHROME HEARTS, STICKERS, STYLIST'S OWN

Over food, he explains that he's never proclaimed to be a musical genius. "I wanna be that feeling of throwing paint at the wall and sometimes it's gonna be a masterpiece and sometimes it's gonna fucking suck," he says. "I look at truly great British artists like Amy Winehouse or Arctic Monkeys or Sam Fender, they have their critically acclaimed albums on [album] one or two or three. I am not like them, I will never be like them. My masterpiece is not *Back to Black* or *Whatever People Say I Am, That's What I'm Not*. It's a 35-year career of making other people feel like they can express themselves. They are about the music; I am about the fucking people." Harrison's voice has changed: he is starting to speak in declarations and Yungblud has been switched on.

Can he be brutally honest with me? "I don't give a fuck what people rate my albums as. It's not about being critically acclaimed to me, it's about connecting to people." To me, a critic, who will not deter him from making more work: "Ultimately, I love you, but I don't give a fuck. But I like to read [reviews] because it's fun. I like seeing how people's minds work." He goes on to speak about the recent reviews for *Yungblud*. The long and considered *Guardian* piece (three stars) he enjoyed but not the snarkier Pitchfork one (four-and-a-half out of a maximum 10). At least the *Guardian* review interrogated his actual music, he says, and didn't just feel like a hit piece.

Again and again, he says it's about the people. He only cares if *people* are moved by what he does. "When you press play on this fucking article, are people moved by your writing?" he challenges me. "That's all that fucking matters." There are three Yungblud albums waiting for release. He might mix them together to make one better album but whatever he does, he's taking his time to make something great. Then again, it might not be his best – his *Back to Black* or *Whatever People Say I Am*. "My definition of art is the expression and the imperfection of energy. I'm not right yet, but that's my painting," he says. "That's what I want to say to the fucking media and to young people and to the fucking world: your journey is your painting."

When Yungblud gets in full flow, words can lose definition and sentences are capitalised and underlined. The music press, delighted to be in the presence of vibrancy, run his speeches in full and without interpretation. They read like dramatic monologues, occasionally like copy for a "disruptive" marketing company. Here's one of them, galvanised and well-meaning: "I want to be here to eradicate hate from preconception. That's what I'm here to do for everyone: for you, for me, for every fucker in here, and I want to make a difference in your life even if you know it or not. Even if you never fucking hear of me, I'm gonna work my whole life to do that. Even if I never succeed, that's my mission. That's what turns me on, that's my vibe. I love people and I think the world can be better." You hear him talk and feel endeared to him and faintly roused to some unknown action. His conversation is peppered with "you know what I mean" but through his mixed metaphors you're not always sure what is going on.

Despite his tendency to leave you bewildered, he knows that his purpose is to speak. "Some people have got hit bangers, I'm here to say things," he says. "I love Harry Styles, I love Lizzo, I love Ariana Grande, but they say everything and nothing at all." When his oration is used for good rather than to define what "Yungblud" is, its execution and impact fall into place. For example, ahead of September's Firefly Festival in Delaware, Harrison had been reading up on the death of Mahsa Amini, an Iranian girl killed in her home country by morality police for not wearing her hijab. He intended to speak about it on stage and was waiting for the perfect moment, which came when their gear broke mid-concert. A recording of him discussing it was uploaded to his TikTok account. It is currently one of his most popular videos on the app with nearly nine million views.

When he returned to London, some British-Iranian girls approached him to say they'd seen the video online and thanked him for speaking about the human rights violation. After they left, he found himself getting emotional ("that means more to me than being number one in the singles chart").

While he works on creating a great fourth album, he will keep his inner circle tight. This includes Jesse Jo Stark, his fashion designer and musician girlfriend. He first met her in 2020 when he cast her in his video for 'Strawberry Lipstick'. "She's been so centring in my life, she's just my best friend and I wanna hang out with her all day," Harrison says of Stark. "I wanna hear her talk. I love what she's got to say. I love her views on the world, even if they're not the same as mine. I just think she's who I was supposed to end up with. She's cynical and we can't combat each other because I'm so optimistic. So, I bring her out of her shell, and she grounds me like no one else." On their further differences, he adds, "She's the most rock'n'roll person I've ever met. I say I don't give a fuck but I do a little bit. She does not give a fuck. It's like, '*Wow*.'" Eventually he wants to have a huge family. "I have a massive dream: I wanna have six kids, I wanna have loads of kids, even if I adopt them as well."

"I have a dream: I wanna have loads of kids"

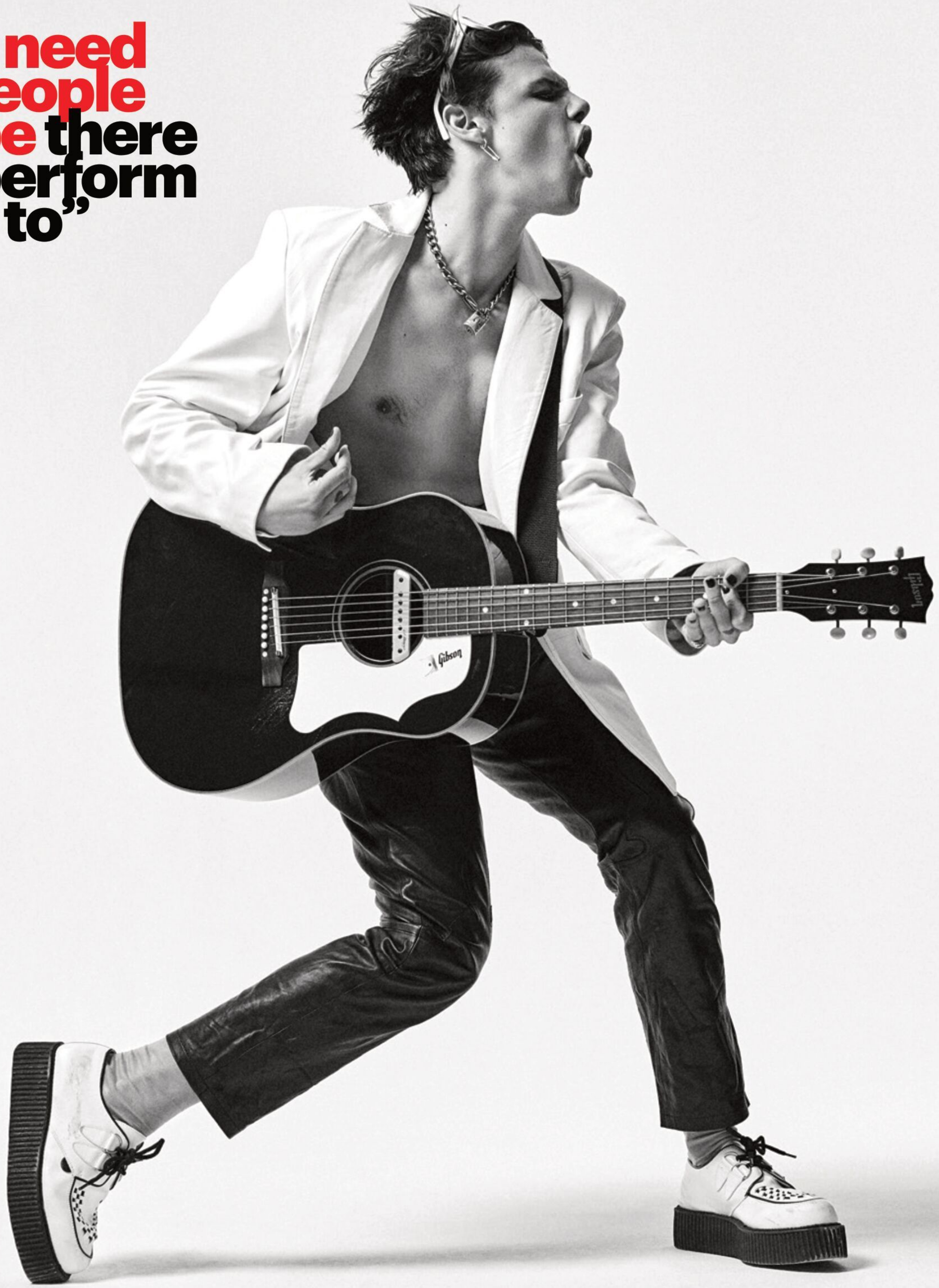
Until then, he'll finish post-album promo and enjoy the response to his short film based on his song 'Mars', which stars talent from the trans, nonbinary and wider queer community. He will design some clothes and write a musical for theatre, a prospect that seems objectively ideal for him. He will work with Avril Lavigne, an artist he's loved since he was 11 years old, on her next album: "She's in a place where she's centring herself and thinking, 'What does Avril Lavigne do best?' She's on fire. I want her to get a Grammy on this album. That's what I keep saying to her. They're *songs*, man." Almost every day in his schedule until September 2023 is accounted for. In the spirit of moving into this more considered phase of his career, he will take a month off around Christmas to recharge. He and Stark will stay at Lenny Kravitz's house in the Bahamas, to drink from coconuts and attempt to do nothing.

Harrison's team believe that his classic rock album will exist when they finally manage to put his larger-than-life live performances onto record. "Every producer I've ever worked with, their opinion is of how to harness me: 'We've got to put what's on stage in a record,'" he says, the only time over a series of days he shows any irritability. "I'm like, 'Yeah, I *know*. I've been fucking trying.' Every time, it's chipping away."

As we finish our meal, we talk about how he might do that.

THE BEATLES
The Who
PULP
EXPLICIT CONTENT
PLACEBO
THE CLASH
OZZY OSBOURNE
RADIOHEAD
SEX PISTOLS

“I need people to be there to perform to”



OPPOSITE: YUNGBLUD WEARS BLAZER BY 8 BY YOOX, LEATHER TROUSERS BY ALTU AT MATCHESFASHION, SOCKS BY FALKE, SHOES BY UNDERGROUND, JEWELLERY BY CHROME HEARTS, SUNGLASSES BY SALVATORE FERRAGAMO

THIS PAGE: YUNGBLUD WEARS LATEX BLAZER (WORN BACKWARDS) BY ATSUKO KUDO, LEATHER TROUSERS AND NECKLACE BY CHROME HEARTS

"There's so many writers on my records who didn't write a fucking word, but they were in the fucking room, so I have to give them publishing," he says. "I sit and I write the songs, but I need people to be there to perform to. If we were in the studio, part of me wants to impress you so I'd nail it. Do you know what I'm saying? If I'm in there on my own, I'll give it 60 per cent. If you're in there and, I don't know, Jared Leto's in there, I'll give you an iconic take in one. It's my energy – my energy doesn't lie."

THE NEXT DAY I got to witness the Yungblud personality at 11. We travel in a minivan with his crew from San Francisco to Sacramento. Hard-rock classics are selected by Harrison and his day-to-day tour manager: Airbourne – 'Runnin' Wild', Sublime – 'What I Got', Kid Rock – 'All Summer Long'. Harrison laughs reading the festival line-up for the day on his phone. In an obnoxious American voice he says, "Airbourne, Papa Roach and Yungblud: This. Is. Aftershock." A significant percentage of this US crowd aren't going to know him but that ability to successfully preach to future enthusiasts is exactly what he says he wants me to witness.

On the drive, Harrison shoots out the opinions of someone who is always deeply enthused or appalled by the topic in question. Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen ("What a bunch of legends"); bro-country duo Florida Georgia Line ("Fire, bruv"); the fact one of his crew used to eat the British chocolate bar Twirl wrapped in a Fruit Winder ("Fucked, bruv") and as he enters US fast-food restaurant Chick-fil-A (homophobic politics: bad; chicken: unreal, delicious), he says, "I'm a big bi boy walking into Chick-fil-A to fuck shit up."

By the time I step off the van with everyone else and walk to the artist trailers, Harrison has beaten us there. He's already out in the swampy oppressive heat wearing full-black layers and lobbing bean bags across to Papa Roach's trailer. His team is barely cognisant of anything, searching for bottled water or tentatively taking their damp shirts off. Around the main stage, security are having to hose down the crowd for their own safety. Ten minutes later, Harrison is still tossing bean bags around to amuse himself and shouting to his friends.

As we approach his set time, Harrison emerges from his trailer like the Kim Kardashian peeking bush meme, holding a scoop of white electrolyte powder. "Anyone want any Charlie?" he shouts, creasing at his own joke. He is in hyper-active kid mode now. He strides around asking if his shorts are too revealing or if he should put another pair of boxers on (he knows the answer and acts accordingly). He continues the Tommy Lee impressions he began the night before at a bar: crisp, almost parrot-like ("Holy fuck, I fucking love rock music"). Next come the full-bodied Jim Carrey skits from *The Grinch* and *The Mask* – scarily accurate. His team, used to such shenanigans, take longer to become infected with his humour than me but when they get there, it only encourages him more.

It's golden hour when Harrison and his band take to the stage. The turning point in the set, the moment he wins enough of the crowd over, comes about halfway through when he asks: "Does anyone think we're shit?" Some answer yes. "Does anybody think we're fucking great?" People make a lot more noise. "Well, that's told you, innit!" They laugh at this frankness and settle into what he has to offer.

Afterwards, a promoter for the festival comes up to him and says that if his next album does well in the States, they'll get him to headline. Older male rockers congratulate him on his set. "Those are the seats in the arenas, those are who you need to get to grow an audience over here," he tells me conspiratorially. Anything feels possible. As if he overheard our conversation from the day before, a middle-aged man approaches to shake Harrison's hand and says, "Your energy is unbelievable."

On the drive back to San Francisco in the dark, his team is knackered and overheated, either asleep or heads down, headphones in. After a while, Harrison climbs into the empty front seat next to the driver ("What's your name again, brother?") and starts DJing to himself. First, he plays Blondie's 'One Way or Another', the song typically used in movie scenes or adverts to soundtrack an underdog character's attempt to win someone over. During Patti Smith's 'Because the Night', Harrison mouths the lyrics and performs jazz hands to an imaginary audience through the windscreen. As The Beatles' 'A Hard Day's Night' plays 20 minutes later, someone notices that Harrison is unconscious, mouth open. I lean in to make sure he's not messing around as they say, "I've never seen him asleep in my whole life." ®

GROOMING BY GEORGINA HAMED USING BALMAIN HAIR COUTURE
PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANTS: LUKE JOHNSON AND BEN TURNER
FASHION ASSISTANT: SACHA DANCE

BREAKTHROUGH AWARD

Bree Runway

SHE'S THAT GIRL

This was Bree Runway's year. She collaborated with Stormzy, added more A-listers to her growing fan base and is now regularly recognised in the streets of London, her hometown. Rolling Stone UK met Bree for her most intimate interview yet

BY KEMI ALEMORU
PHOTOGRAPHY BY STONEY

FASHION DIRECTION BY JOSEPH KOCHARIAN
STYLING BY HOLLY WOOD

PREVIOUS PAGE: CORSET BY VIVIENNE WESTWOOD, TROUSERS BY PHILOSOPHY DI LORENZO SERAFINI, SUNGLASSES BY GUCCI AT AMO VINTAGE, EARRINGS AND RING BY PHOEBE WALSH JEWELLERY, NECKLACE BY MUSEE ROO, BANGLE BY HANNAH MARTIN, SILVER BANGLE BANGLE BY AND_I

OPPOSITE: BODYSUIT BY MUGLER, SKIRT BY SOURTAI, EARRING BY SHAUN LEANE, NECKLACES BY VIVIENNE WESTWOOD, NECKLACE BY PHOEBE WALSH, EARRING, RING AND NECKLACES BY MUSEE ROO, EARRING AND NECKLACE BY HANNAH MARTIN, NECKLACE BY DOSISG6C

THERE ARE FEW THINGS more integral to the adolescent daydream of being a pop star than conceptualising a music video where you look hot while an electric fan blows through your hair. On the set of her new single 'That Girl', Bree Runway's legs are straddling a powerful white motorcycle, her ombre wig flying back from her angular and contemplative face as she basks in the breeze. It's still too tame for her. "Fuck me up. I want to feel like I'm riding through the West End," she calls to a nearby assistant. She then asks for her body – which is nearly bare save for a custom two-piece outfit fashioned from a small number of black belts – to be oiled up. The camera starts rolling and she goes full throttle, rapping: "*If you bad and you know it, better show out, girl*" to the camera. She punctuates each word of the bar by gyrating up and down on the seat: "*It's. Just. Like. Whatever*."

Bree Runway – real name Brenda Mensah – makes it look easy. Her kaleidoscopic vision is due in part to the fact that she is a child of the music channel generation. "Flicking from MTV all the way to the white rock channels like Kerrang! showed me what you're supposed to give. Looks need to be served. Nothing I saw was boring. Since I was a kid, I knew that if you are in this position to be a pop star you needed to wow," she explains.

As a teenager, Mensah loved mavericks like Lady Gaga so much that she emulated the musician by wearing one glove and holding a teacup as a fashion statement. Her mum enjoyed 80s ballads by the likes of Phil Collins and Queen, while her dad was a big fan of older Ghanaian highlife music with textured instrumentation. The West African hotspot has become a party haven for Black Brits recalling the glory days of Ayia Napa at Christmas, but Mensah returns there to feel centred and find inspiration ("I'm used to it feeling like home or a resting place, not Ibiza"). Absorbing all these different influences also imbued the singer-songwriter with a hunger for variety. By taking a commercial music performance degree at London's University of Westminster, Mensah learned how to develop her skills as well as the intricacies of instrumentation and composition. All of this is evident in how she throws the kitchen sink at her EPs and albums by experimenting with every sound from hyperpop and electronic beats to trap and adrenaline-inducing electric guitar, rapping, singing and writing.

A keen viewer of the Bree Runway Instagram and YouTube channel would also notice that she's constantly modelling new standout looks with a technicolour range of wigs, extreme stiletto manicures and enviable high-fashion outfits to live up to her stage name. "I dress for my mood and my mood is always a little dash of stripper, power silhouettes, and wanting to stand out," Mensah says. She posed in an electric-blue cut-out dress with Naomi Campbell at the Off-White show at Paris Fashion Week, designed a denim two-piece for her trip to New York, and has worn ensembles from exciting rising designers like Chet Lo and Leeann Huang. When you top this all off with high-octane dance routines rarely seen from UK pop stars, you must ask yourself: who the hell is doing it like our Breakthrough Award-winner, Bree Runway?

THE 29-YEAR-OLD IS completely aware that she naturally possesses an artistic dexterity that other acts hire whole teams to create. As we sit in a restaurant a short walk from her east London home, Mensah tells me that she spends hours trying to manifest a vision of her career as Bree Runway. "I moodboard my whole life on my iPad, I put myself at the centre and have a spider coming out of my name and think about how I can organise everything to be amazing around me. I make notes about how I want to look, and especially how I want to feel." As for the upcoming music, she has some soul-baring collaborations coming with Stormzy and Khalid, but there's a different sound elsewhere on the EP: "It's more aggressive, more colourful, dangerous guitars. Silly!"

It's been a pivotal couple of years. In 2020, the album 2000SAND4EVA dropped. 'APESHIT', she says, is a song that embodies her the most, as it flips from bombastic bars on the verses to sexy vocals on the bridge. It's bold, chaotic and playful. There's a reverence for the past that also somehow catapults us into the future. Even in lockdown she kept the momentum going by filming the video for 'DAMN DANIEL' in her living room. Bree Runway was dubbed the Sound of 2021 by the BBC and Best New International Act at the BET Awards while also being nominated for the Rising Star award at the BRITs.

It also became clear that Bree Runway is your favourite artists' inspiration. Mensah reels off a few of those names: "I was just with Lil Nas X, who told me he is a big fan, Megan [Thee Stallion], Doja Cat, Cardi goes out of her way to celebrate me, and Kehlani says I should feel mega for what I am doing. SZA said 'Somebody Like You' means a lot to her. I'm like, 'Oh my God, how do you guys up there see *me*?'" She also collaborated with her idol Gaga on a rework of 'Babylon' on the *Dawn of Chromatica* remix album, and enlisted another hero, Missy Elliott, to rap on 'ATM'. "People kept seeing videos of me and saying, 'I didn't know Missy had a fine daughter,'" she laughs. "She saw it and she told me to keep doing my thing."

There are many parallels between Brenda Mensah and the VMA Video Vanguard Award-winner. Missy Elliott was always a talented student, to the extent that she would fail on purpose to fit in with the other kids. Growing up in Hackney, and attending Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School in Islington, Mensah's teens were tough. She tells me she too dimmed her shine at school as she was bullied for being too different. Pupils made her feel annoying for the fact that she could sing and dance – though this did earn her the opportunity of performing for Michelle Obama when she visited pupils in 2009. The then First Lady

“I mood-board my whole life on my iPad”

“Being weird and dark is my selling point”

THIS PAGE: WINGED HARNESS BY GABI FABIYI, CORSET BY RUE_L, TROUSERS BY SANKUANZ, GLOVES BY PAULA ROWAN, NECKLACE, BANGLE AND RINGS BY HANNAH MARTIN, EARRING BY MUSEE ROO, RINGS BY PHOEBE WALSH JEWELLERY

OPPOSITE: BREE WEARS DRESS BY PACO RABANNE, BOOTS BY GIUSEPPE ZANOTTI, EARRING AND RING BY PHOEBE WALSH JEWELLERY, NECKLACES BY VIVIENNE WESTWOOD AND HANNAH MARTIN

called her a "star". Mensah even felt bad that her hair was long and full. She was inspired by Missy Elliott's lyrics and surreal visuals that celebrated being voluptuous, dark, bizarre and beautiful. In Missy's first *Rolling Stone* interview in 1997, she said her ostentatious persona helps her shake off her shy character. Similarly, Mensah says she can be coy. "Brenda sometimes can't even take being looked at on the street by a guy. She'll be like, 'What's the problem?' Forgetting that she's just pretty. It's the schoolchild in me."

She has been frank about the fact that she now loudly celebrates her hue because she was made to feel like her dark skin was a hindrance. At nine years old, she attempted bleaching and damaged her skin. "I got tired of feeling ugly," she says. "Walking past bus stops with Black boys from other schools wasn't always nice." But ultimately, she feels like the fact that she never fitted the mould gave her the freedom to break out of it. It's satisfying being celebrated for all the things she was teased for: "Being weird and dark is literally my selling point," she states.

After her tour ended with a sold-out show in New York earlier this year, Mensah returned to London and took four months off. "I wasn't present or full of life being Brenda. Brenda felt abandoned," she says. "I knew how to act when the camera comes on, but I also felt like a li'l baby who needed to be carried around in a Louis Vuitton bag," she confides. The break allowed Mensah to take stock of her life in its entirety, reflecting on what she wasn't enjoying about her career. "I discovered so much about myself, my artistry, my business and certain structures that work for me and that don't. It's really helped me." She split from her manager and began to do some soul-searching.

Continuing with that theme, I ask whether she would rather be the best player on a team that always loses, or the worst player on a team that always wins?

"The best player on the team that is losing is doing the job properly. I don't want to just get by, I don't like cutting corners," she says. "I'm not always looking at other people's career or feeling jealous." She's also never been bitter about what stage she's at in her vision. In 2017, Mensah was working in retail at Christian Louboutin until her passion for music started to get in the way of her being able to commit to shifts on the forward-planning rota. When she quit, she was "piss poor" so she started doing cloakroom shifts, waitressing and hospitality at weddings where you get "treated like shit" by managers. "I'd be that person on the staff team that has a blue tick on Instagram and people would be like, 'Wait, aren't you–?' and you're like, 'Yes, I am, but I don't have the money right now.' Then I'd swap wigs from black to blue because I'm going to Rihanna's party afterwards. There's nothing I've had easy, I'm a grafter."

A recurring comment from fans on her videos is that Bree Runway should already be a household name and isn't getting her dues. It's a wonder she doesn't feel oppressed by their impression of where she should be. "Conversations around me deserving more don't shake me because I've come so far, and I just care about whether I'm more successful than yesterday. I know it's because they love me, but everything will happen in due time. Why would we want to rush this journey? It's exciting. I don't want to have one hit and done," she says. For her, an artist's development is crucial and as Bree Runway, Mensah is enjoying the evolution of bringing "O2 arena energy" to any room of any size.

"I try not to accept a doomsville narrative around colourism," she says. "The 'Bree isn't where she should be because she's dark skin' thing – I don't really like to accept that. I have a very delusional state of mind that comes from my faith. I'm doing something different despite what I look like. And if we're going off looks, I'm hot, so whatever."

HER IMPRESSIVE WORK ethic means that Mensah only comes home to put her bag down and sleep before leaving again without taking it in ("my balcony view is amazing"). She clearly takes pride in where she lives now. Her high-rise block is grand and stands in stark contrast to her beginnings growing up near what press dubbed the "murder mile". "Hackney was dangerous. It could go from sunshine to rain really quickly, in the sense that you could be outside

“I don’t lack love. I’m not looking for it in desperate places...

„I have it from God, from my family, my fans"

THIS PAGE: CORSET BY VIVIENNE WESTWOOD, TROUSERS BY PHILOSOPHY DI LORENZO SERAFINI, SHOES BY CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN, SUNGLASSES BY GUCCI AT AMO VINTAGE, EARRINGS BY PHOEBE WALSH JEWELLERY, NECKLACE BY MUSEE ROO, BANGLE BY HANNAH MARTIN, SILVER BANGLE BY AND_I

OPPOSITE: BODYSUIT BY MUGLER, EARRING BY SHAUN LEANE, NECKLACES BY VIVIENNE WESTWOOD, NECKLACE BY PHOEBE WALSH, EARRING AND NECKLACES BY MUSEE ROO, EARRING AND NECKLACE BY HANNAH MARTIN, NECKLACE BY DOSISG6C

“I’m amazing in every single way”

THIS PAGE: WINGED HARNESS BY GABI FABIYI, CORSET BY RUE_L, TROUSERS BY SANKUANZ, BOOTS BY PACO RABANNE, GLOVES BY PAULA ROWAN, NECKLACE, BANGLE AND RINGS BY HANNAH MARTIN, EARRING BY MUSEE ROO, RINGS BY PHOEBE WALSH JEWELLERY

OPPOSITE: BREE WEARS DRESS BY PACO RABANNE, EARRING AND RING BY PHOEBE WALSH JEWELLERY, NECKLACES BY VIVIENNE WESTWOOD AND HANNAH MARTIN

playing with your friends and then you look over the balcony in the estates and there's a frickin' shoot-out happening downstairs... but it's not like that anymore," she says casually. I'm wary of fuelling the played-out rags-to-riches narrative often gleefully repeated when talking about Black artists. "If my dad was rich, I'd own that and be happy, but it's looking like I'm the first person in my family that's going to live this sort of lifestyle. We can't help that that is our reality... but journalists are obsessed with that shit," she laughs.

Creative people are far more likely to live in chaos according to research, so I'm not actually allowed to see the apartment. "I would have let you in before but there's so many boxes in there from video shoots and I don't have the energy to clean," she says. During her time off, Mensah attempted to turn her home into a sanctuary and Marie Kondo'ed the place getting rid of old clothes ("I did a car boot sale at Princess May in Dalston and let things go like for the low low, I sold a Dior bag for £80") and practised feng shui.

Mensah often drops God into conversation as if he is a personal friend that is on speed dial – which, if you are religious, I suppose he is. As we walk around her neighbourhood, Mensah reveals that she prays over all her possessions. Vintage items need more prayer than others because they have had a previous owner and a different life that you aren't privy to. "Especially jewellery, that's very important. You wear necklaces next to your heart," she says.

She focuses on spirituality as she generally finds mortal men disappointing. "I feel that it just has to be worth doing. I don't lack love; I'm not looking for it in desperate places. I have it from God, I have it from family, I have it from my fans," she explains. That's why there is a lack of love songs in her catalogue as the lyrics are usually declarations of self love, like in 'Hot Hot', instructions on tracks like 'LITTLE NOKIA' ("*throw him in the dustbin*"), and allegorical tales of men to avoid on 'X2C' ("*Who's that girl in your Instagram comments?/Put my gloves on, I'mma fight*"). A key believer of manifesting by putting pen to paper, 'Somebody Like You' is essentially a callout for the man she wishes she had. The original track is a moving ballad with Phil Collins-esque drums where Mensah exhibits her incredible vocal range hitting high octaves in a saccharine tone before giving way to a more full-bodied cry to show her yearning.

Mensah explains that the last time she was actually in love was "many, many years ago". If you're looking to become Mr Runway, she has a pretty clear idea on what it would take. "I want to meet a guy that knows themselves, that isn't a slave to material things. I have a lot of clothes but that's because I'm passionate about fashion – it's not to impress. 'I love the silhouette of that, or the buckles really match this bag.' That's so different to, 'I don't feel like a man so I'm gonna wear this chain.' It's giving insecurity and I'm giving big D energy amongst my feminine energy," Mensah adds. "I'm looking for that needle-in-the-haystack guy. I want to be in a love that makes me feel like I want to do life again just so I can experience more of this person. Until then, I'll just focus on myself, looking hot and lasering my vag."

As one of the UK's only avant-garde pop stars constantly trying to break the mould, Bree Runway is rightly earning nods from industry titans and her burgeoning fan base. And, despite Mensah's off-duty pop star disguise of a black hoodie (with her blue wig only poking out slightly), eyes hidden behind glasses, and sans-manicure nails, she's also just been recognised by the waitresses in the restaurant behind us. "Don't look now but that girl over there just showed her friend my Instagram page and I saw the whole thing," she says while looking down. We continue chatting, keenly aware of the increasing audience to our conversation. There isn't a topic we can cover that doesn't become an example of her self-love, her thirst for originality, her unrivalled passion. "I'm amazing in every single way down to the contents of my soul and the energy that I provide men," Mensah proclaims. "Men are high not even from having sex with me, just hanging out with me, they're like, 'Oh my God, I love this girl.' I mean that humbly as well. I'm just such a good vibe. I know myself. I didn't buy a personality off the internet – there's a lot of girls like that. So, when guys come across me, they're super obsessed with me, they love me the fuck down... and I don't blame them." Neither do we. ®

HAIR BY SERAIAH ARTISTRY, MAKEUP BY TOMI AJAYI, NAILS BY KATT KATANA, FASHION ASSISTANTS: IZZY FROST AND FRANK TYLER

Groove

ICON AWARD

THE BOYS ARE BACK

The electronic duo quit touring in 2010, with Andy Cato moving into sustainable farming and Tom Findlay becoming a therapist. Now, 12 years later, they've nearly completed one final live tour, and have recorded new material for their 25-track greatest hits box set. Rolling Stone UK checked in to chat outdated technology, nipple tassels and playing Groove Armada to cows

BY RICH PELLEY

Armada

THE WATERBOYS
Glasgow Barrowland,
NONCHALANCE
GLASGOW BARROWLAND
FRIDAY 27TH
FEBRUARY
plus Special
THE BARROWLAND
Gallowgate, Gl
Tuesday 23rd Oc
Doors 7:3
Tickets £12.50 In A
OVER 14's ON
UNDER 16's MUST BE ACCOMP
Seperate Licensed Bar Avail

MORE THAN 23 years after 'At the River' reached number 19, Groove Armada's appearance on *Top of the Pops* still gives Andy Cato nightmares.

"It was a horror show," the 6ft 8in ex-Grimethorpe Colliery Band trombonist says, squirming, over Zoom from his Cotswold farm kitchen. "In a ridiculous moment of puritanism, we insisted on playing live. It was before laptops, so we had an incredibly unstable desktop jacked into the BBC sound desk. During final dress rehearsal, the camera guy accidentally knocked the computer on the floor, wiping it completely." After a desperate rush around the dodgiest electronic shops in London's Shepherd's Bush, Cato had to reprogram the whole lot from scratch. Panicking about his trombone part, he pressed 'Enter' the moment the cameras started to roll. "We ended up doing this hopelessly nervous performance, wondering if anything would work," he tells me.

"We were smoking quite a lot of weed at the time," adds Tom Findlay as we chat the following day (he missed the designated Rolling Stone UK Zoom slot because he'd gone to watch his beloved Arsenal beat the Netherlands' PSV 1-0). "The samples came on 30 floppy disks that you had to load in exactly the right order. You can imagine how many times you'd get to 27 and then mess it all up when you're quite stoned..."

Technology has progressed through Groove Armada's nine-album catalogue which has scored them three UK Top 10 albums, three nominations at the Grammys and the BRITs, plus a Billboard nomination. Their latest album, 2020's *Edge of the Horizon*, was recorded virtually between the two during lockdown, followed by "a totally sleepless week in Tom's basement in east London, finishing it all off".

"We were on the back end of tape, so collaborations with Neneh Cherry [on 2002 track 'Think Twice'], Richie Havens [on 2004's 'Hands of Time'], and Candy Staton [on 2007's 'Paris'] were still taped because there's something magic about the sound," recalls Cato. "On our first records, you only had two seconds of sampling space, so you were very restricted. But a lot of creativity comes from restriction. When we delivered our first album [1998's *Northern Star*], we were um-ing and ah-ing about what songs to leave off the cassette version. That's how long ago that was!"

In an era when dance acts blended synths and DJing with striking visuals, Groove Armada focused on ensuring every element of their performance was as live as possible, curating immersive experiences and delivering unforgettable scenes at Glastonbury and a then-record-breaking five-night run at Brixton Academy in 2010. This April, Groove Armada completed what was billed as their final tour (supported by Norman Jay MBE, PBR Streetgang, Ewan McVicar and Ishmael Ensemble), and are off for a five-consecutive-night run in Australia this November. Except... didn't they claim to quit touring 12 years ago? "Obviously, we've said this in 2010, when we brought the live band to a close before..." says Cato, labelling Groove Armada's then 25-man live crew as "commercial idiocy". That year also saw the meteoric rise of EDM and less tolerance for Groove Armada's more nuanced electronic sound at festivals. "It just felt like we were pushing a boulder up a hill," says Findlay. "The effort we were putting in to perform just wasn't being appreciated next to the superstar DJs wearing capes." They decided to gracefully bow out. But 12 years later, both felt the time was right for one final hurrah. "I think it was just a mild sense of unfinished business that we would regret it if we didn't," explains Findlay.

"When we played at Latitude Festival this summer, the average age was 19 or 20," says Cato. "It's fantastic that we've managed to stay relevant."

Since 2010, the pair have diversified, with Cato moving into farming and Findlay qualifying as a BABCP (British Association for Behavioural & Cognitive Psychotherapies) therapist.

"I read an article on the way back from a gig about industrial food production and the consequences for human health environment," explains Cato. "Basically, whether we can sustain a liveable planet, and it's not pretty reading." This sent Cato down a rabbit hole from growing vegetables in his garden, to the heart of Wild Farm Now, a community of 50 farmers who supply supermarkets from restorative and sustainable means. Cato moved to France in 2008, acquiring his first farm in 2013. In 2018, he was awarded the Chevalier de l'Ordre du Mérite Agricole (The Order of Agricultural Merit) for services to agriculture — and recently moved his family back to a new farm in the Cotswolds. Which begs the question: does he play Groove Armada to his cows?

"It felt like pushing a boulder up a hill" — Findlay

"I don't, which is probably why they're thriving," he laughs. Has Findlay been to visit?

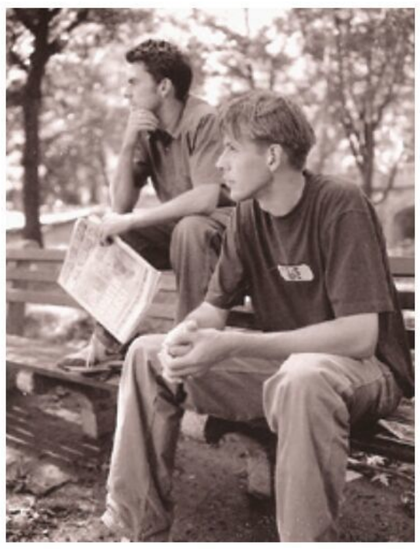
"I spent a huge amount of time in France when we recorded *Black Light*, 12 years ago," Findlay says. "I've been down to the new farm in the Cotswolds. I'm very supportive, but it's not really my thing. I'm a Londoner; I like my creature comforts." Findlay's move into therapy, meanwhile, was partly due to his own state of mind, he reveals.

"I had an extended period of depression in 2010 when we made *Black Light*, which is partly why it's called *Black Light*, because that was exactly how I was feeling: very demotivated, avoidant and withdrawn. It took me a long time to get diagnosis and treatment. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) was helpful, so I ended up reading a lot on that. That led to a Master's in psychology and a postgraduate diploma in CBT.

"I started working at the beginning of the pandemic because I assumed music wasn't going to be a concern for a while. Now I'm a counsellor three days a week at a London university.

LANTY ZHANG

“The best thing has been to share it with a mate”



MEMORIES (Clockwise from below): A young Findlay and Cato; fans party to Groove Armada; the pair in Central Park, New York; off stage at Lovebox, the festival Findlay and Cato helped to create

I know Luke Howard from Horse Meat Disco, who I bumped into the other night, is training as a psychodynamic therapist. Ed [Simons] from The Chemical Brothers is doing something similar. It just seems that if you're in the industry, you need to find ways to manage your mental health."

Cato's self-confessed "nomadic" lifestyle led to him selling his publishing rights to Groove Armada to help finance the purchase of his farm. "All those royalty cheques for 'At the River' being played in adverts [including one for M&S Food in 2006] go to someone else now." Findlay has hung onto his, which means the pair retain some creative control, like saying no to the American Navy who wanted to use 'Little by Little' for a recruitment video. "It didn't feel right to be recruiting for war with Richie Havens on vocals."

With their lockdown album and final (until the next one?) tour scheduled, the duo commissioned a series of remixes of their biggest tracks by Logic1000, Dance System, Ewan McVicar and more, and have been working on new music for their upcoming 25-track *GA25* box set, to celebrate 25 of all things Groove Armada — again leading to some "super intense" sessions in Findlay's basement studio. "Tom fills his fridge full of beers and we stay down there until it's done," smirks Cato.

Cato grew up in Barnsley and read modern history at Oxford, where he met his girlfriend — now wife — Jo, who is Findlay's best mate from school in Cambridge, where he grew up. "Tom's been my first wife in terms of contact time," he laughs. In 25 years, the pair have only had one argument, a "proper set to" in Camden that caused one to storm out of the other's car, but neither can remember who was driving, or what it was all about.

They must have seen some things over their "sleep-deprived" 25 years together, I speculate. What are their highlights?

"Nearly meeting Prince 10 years ago in San Francisco's Ruby Lounge was pretty amazing," says Findlay. "We kept getting these messages that he was going to come down. Obviously, he didn't, but the fact that we'd entered into the Purple One's consciousness was amazing."

"Elton John booked us to play a party for *Interview Magazine* in New York," he continues. "There were eight of us crammed in this tiny dressing room right at the top; he came all the way up the stairs. I think he'd just had a pacemaker fitted and was clearly out of breath, but we were so flabbergasted, staring open-mouthed, slack-jawed, it took five minutes for anyone to offer him a seat."

Cato recounts tales of flying in a bi-plane "in full Biggles outfits" into a US aircraft hangar to DJ and being told to "look natural" while posing between two scantily clad, greased-up ladies doing the hoovering for a big American dance magazine (neither can remember which). And that's before we get to Manumission in Ibiza, where Groove Armada would regularly DJ in the basement while live sex shows were happening upstairs.

"We ended up living in this place called the Manumission Motel, off a roundabout on the outskirts of Ibiza Town, where all the, er, 'entertainers' would live," explains Findlay.

"Before you knew it, I'd dyed my hair purple and we'd moved into this ex-brothel with gold taps and leopard-skin finish," says Cato. "There would be someone sitting on the stairs, naked, with a sewing machine, repairing their nipple tassels. We've been really lucky in that we've had a window into that world of madness. But the best thing has been to share it with a mate and never lose sight of the total absurdity of the situation." ®

_GA25_ IS OUT ON 11 NOVEMBER VIA BMG
SEE GROOVEARMADA.COM

LANTY ZHANG

Eliza Rose

RISING STAR AWARD

"I'M A RAVER BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE"

Eliza Rose is a DJ, singer, producer and avid record collector who just took a UK rave tune to number one

BY SAM DAVIES

ELIZA ROSE WAS making music long before she was famous. In 2015, she released 'The Moonshine' EP, five tracks including a T-Pain cover alongside some beautiful R&B sounding just a bit like Amy Winehouse. "*If I'm generally anything, I'm generally miserable*" she sings on 'Straight & Narrow', the second track on the EP. Marilyn Monroe said the same thing in 1960. "Oh my god, old school!" says Rose, blushing at the mention of her early stuff. "You know what you're like when you're 21, 22, you're like, 'The world's awful!' The people I was really loving at that time were damaged heroines, like Amy Winehouse, Billie Holiday, Lana Del Rey..."

It's fair to surmise she's not miserable now. Her last single 'B.O.T.A. (Baddest of Them All)', officially released in August in collaboration with producer Interplanetary Criminal, went gold in the UK after topping the nation's singles chart, making Rose the first woman DJ to hit number one since Sonique in 2002. It's an addictive, unforgettable track, built on two chords sampled from Lisa Lisa and Cult Jam's 1991 house hit 'Let the Beat Hit Em'. But it sounds better on 'B.O.T.A.', sped up, cut to a garage beat and paired with Rose's angelic chorus: "*Do you wanna dance, baby? I know you see me looking at you on the daily...*"

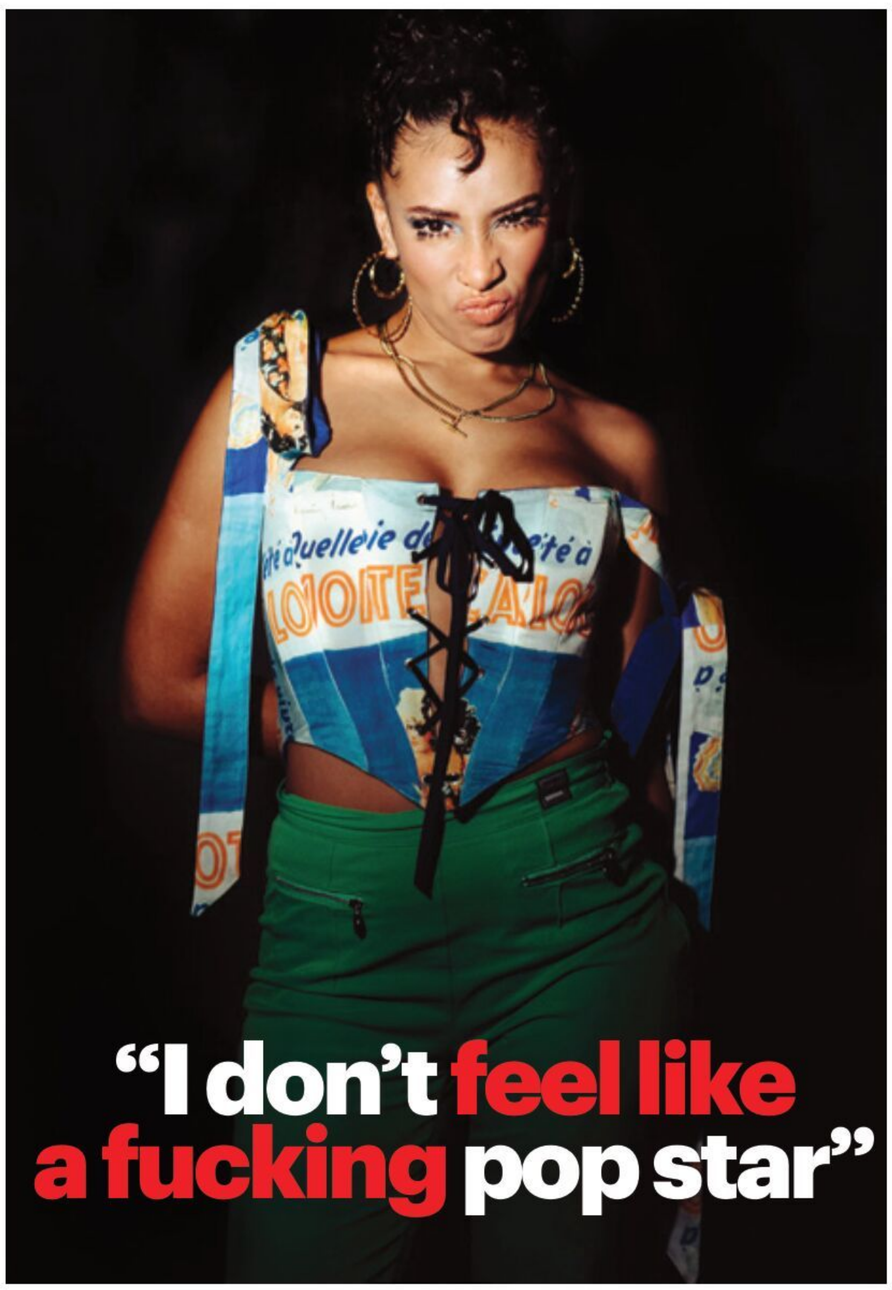
She's every bit as charming to talk to. "You all right, darling?" she beams as she joins the Zoom call. She's speaking after a heavy night out at ADE music festival, where she played a set two nights earlier. "I love Amsterdam," she says. "But it's a bit too much partying, and I love to party so... too much temptation. And I always give in to temptation."

Rose grew up in Dalston, north-east London, the daughter of an acting father who had a few roles in theatre and TV. "If he was born in a different era, I feel like he would have done so well," Rose says. "But there weren't as many roles, there wasn't Black Lives Matter. There's a lot more awareness for diversity and equality now and there wasn't that for my dad." Her mum also flirted with acting before working as a secondary school drama teacher. She and Rose's dad split and Rose lived with her mum and two younger sisters from the age of two, with two younger brothers on her dad's side, making Rose the oldest sibling. "You wouldn't know it, though, I'm probably the most childish," she says, sniggering diabolically.

At 15, she was due to start work experience at a modelling agency, but it fell through at the last minute, leaving her the options of working in a nursery or a record shop. She chose records over nappies and her love for music was born. She started going out to Rudolphs and the Opera House, both Tottenham nightclubs playing old-school garage, where she would sometimes see a young Danny Dyer on the dancefloor. She was still underage ("You'd photocopy your passport and change the date on it, so it looked like you were older than you were").

At about 18 she took her first pill. "I was quite anti it for a long time, having seen the darker side of drugs," she says. She won't elaborate much on that, but taking ecstasy had a big impact, even if she freaked out slightly. "The first time I took it, I called my mum and my mum told me to grow up! It was the best advice 'cos I felt all right after that."

After uni and a Master's, Rose worked a few jobs at record labels and online distributors while also DJing in clubs. "When I went to number one, I literally had £16 in my account," she laughs. "I had to get my friend to get me a round!" The story of how she wrote 'B.O.T.A.' includes a much-repeated anecdote: struggling for a hook, she glanced at her boyfriend's wall and saw a poster for the Pam Grier film *Coffy*, with the line: "The baddest one-chick hit-squad that ever hit town."



PHOEBE COWLEY

Like Grier, Winehouse, Holiday and Miss Monroe, Rose is now approaching the life of a star. "I certainly don't feel like a fucking pop star, I'll tell you that," she says, quickly. "Do you really see me on the fucking red carpet?" What about headlining Glasto? "I like to be in the crowd, that's the thing. I'm actually a raver before anything else."

She was at the festival this year, her third time there, and went to see Kendrick Lamar headline the Pyramid with her mates. "I do love Kendrick, but I'm not gonna lie, I snuck off by myself and just went to rave." She headed straight for the South East Corner, where she saw Robert Hood and his daughter Lyric play heavy techno to a twisted crowd. Her friends found her hours later. "They were like, 'We knew you'd be here.'"

She finished the night watching the sunrise at the Stone Circle, where she stayed until about midday. Which is when someone started playing 'B.O.T.A.' from a Bluetooth speaker. Needless to say, she and her friends went crazy. ®

SONG OF THE YEAR

On the surface, ‘Seventeen Going Under’ was a classic coming-of-age anthem in the vein of ‘Born to Run’ or ‘Summer of ’69’, yet the title track to Sam Fender’s second album carried starker snapshots within its soaring adrenaline rush and festival-primed “whoa-oh-ohs”. An autobiographical account of Fender’s struggles growing up in North Shields, it detailed nihilistic teenage violence, depression and – most affecting of all – Fender’s mother, swamped in debt and on her knees in tears after receiving a letter from the Department for Work and Pensions. Although released in 2021, the song hit its chart peak at number three this year. Aside from pulling off that rare feat of an indie rock song hitting the top three, it bagged Fender a well-deserved Ivor Novello and became the definitive anthem for his show-stealing run of summer festival gigs. However, its real success lies in giving voice to a narrative that, while increasingly faced by many, is conspicuous by its absence in pop music today.

CHRIS CATCHPOLE

Seventeen Going Under
Sam Fender

ALBUM OF THE YEAR

When Arctic Monkeys debuted ‘There’d Better Be a Mirrorball’ earlier this year, it became inherently clear that we weren’t heading back to the riff-heavy, quiff-sporting band that finally woke up America with ‘AM’ back in 2013. Instead, it was the first indication that *The Car* would double down on the divisive lounge-pop sound that they debuted on their last album, 2018’s *Tranquility Base Hotel & Casino*. Although the continued new direction won’t please everyone, there’s beauty to be found in the full-bodied, orchestral feel that the band explores here. ‘There’d Better Be a Mirrorball’, sure, but on the basis of this album ‘There’d Better Be a Bond Song’ in the near future, too. Over to you, Barbara Broccoli.

NICK REILLY

The Car
Arctic Monkeys

DAMON BAKER, MARCUS COOPER, MARK CANT, SAMUEL BRADLEY

RECORD LABEL AWARD

When you look at what three of our favourite artists – Beabadoobee, Rina Sawayama and The 1975 – have in common, it's Dirty Hit. In many respects, all of these artists had their biggest year yet: Bea released her second album with a huge promotional campaign and collaborations; Rina broke into the charts for the first time and was absolutely everywhere you looked – on magazines, TV and adverts; and The 1975 returned with a frontman possessing a fresh mindset and their most thoughtful album. This is a record label at the height of its powers – not chasing hype, not quickly expanding, just focused on releasing great British music.

HANNAH EWENS

Dirty Hit

Bring Me The Horizon

LIVE ACT OF THE YEAR

The Sheffield band's live concerts have long been a far cry from the scrappy, chaotic Student Union bar-era shows they started with. Now Bring Me The Horizon go to US festivals like the recent When We Were Young in Vegas and their sets are every bit as well-attended and compelling to an international audience as those of the final act. In Mexico they just played their biggest headline show to date and this year they became the only new headlining rock band in nearly a decade when they took the top spot at Reading and Leeds 2022. Rumour has it they'll be the main attraction at another key UK festival in 2023, because it's clear that if you want to be entertained by shredding, breakdowns, soaring pop choruses and pithy, goading jabs from a frontman, you want a Bring Me show. It's through this year's live performances that Bring Me The Horizon have proved that they've ascended to become more than just a rock band.

HANNAH EWENS

Stormzy

VIDEO AWARD

In late September, Stormzy's anticipated return came in 'Mel Made Me Do It', a seven-minute track that included a powerful monologue delivered by Michaela Coel. The accompanying video was packed with an impressive string of cameo appearances from the likes of Dave, Little Simz, Headie One, Julie Adenuga and Clint Cortez, offering a groundbreaking snapshot of those currently spearheading Black British culture. Although the song doesn't feature on Stormzy's anticipated third album, *This Is What I Mean*, it proved to be one hell of a comeback for Big Mike.

EMMANUEL ONAPA

Yard Act

BAND AWARD

There's been no shortage of British post-punk groups delivering subversive songs rooted in spoken word (see: Dry Cleaning, Squid), but 2022 saw Yard Act proving why they're one of the sub-genre's most unique voices. Led by frontman James Smith, their debut album *The Overload* made use of surreal imagery and alter-egos to drill down into the minutiae of life in Britain. 'Fixer Upper', for instance, sees Smith adopt the character of unscrupulous property developer Graham to paint an image of a place where everyone is out for themselves. But a subtle streak of positivity reaches its peak on the oddly moving album standout '100% Endurance', which employs an alien invasion to convey the message that there's beauty in the futility of knowing how insignificant our lives are. The track won plaudits in higher places too, leading to a re-recorded version with Sir Elton John.

NICK REILLY

ALAMY, JAMES BROWN

FILM AWARD

Aftersun is one of the most acclaimed films of the year, and Paul Mescal's riveting performance is key to its success. Putting in a warm, sensitive and complex turn as a father holidaying with his daughter, Mescal brings out every nuance in the script from writer-director Charlotte Wells. The Scottish film is another feather in the cap of the Irish actor, who captivated audiences in TV's *Normal People* and was picked by Maggie Gyllenhaal to co-star in *The Lost Daughter* alongside Olivia Colman. He'll also play an accused man in *God's Creatures* and will make a foray into musicals with a contemporary take on *Carmen*. A versatile and intelligent actor, this 26-year-old is one of Ireland's finest talents.

ANNA SMITH

Paul Mescal

FESTIVAL AWARD

Glastonbury made its glorious comeback in June, two years after Covid restrictions put paid to the festival's 50th-anniversary celebrations. Prior to last summer, partying in a post-pandemic world had been an unusual experience: events were back, sure, but for whatever reason, the vibes just felt *off*. Yet being back on Worthy Farm seemed to mark a return to normality. The festival site was unchanged, the weather was good, the crowd was up for anything.

The great line-up helped, feeling totally of-the-moment rather than a holdover from two years earlier. There was space for younger and more diverse headliners (Billie Eilish, Kendrick Lamar), but it still honoured Britain's music heritage (Paul McCartney), while rising stars from Sam Fender to Wolf Alice delivered Pyramid Stage sets for the ages. The after-hours programming, from new stage San Remo to the dance music holy land Block9, was always on point. And other intangibles, from the lack of corporate sponsorship to the fact that, for all the criticisms of the festival's middle-class audience, you still meet a lot of genuine oddballs there, meant that it feels like no other festival in the UK.

Looking back half a year later, though, it's hard not to see it as a brief respite from the pandemic on one side, and the cost-of-living crisis on the other. Most attendees would have bought tickets for this year's festival in 2019, when they cost £285; next year, the price is set to be £335, as everything from inflation to energy bills to transport to Brexit-related paperwork has hit the musical festival sector. It's important to take these moments of joy where you can find them.

SELIM BULUT

Glastonbury

ALAMY, JACK BRIDGLAND

Charli XCX

GAMECHANGER AWARD

When it comes to artists who changed the British music game this year, there's only Charli, baby. The narrative around the alt pop musician has always been that she's an underdog of sorts, that people don't realise her genius. After the highly praised introspective, *How I'm Feeling Now* – written and produced in the early days of Covid lockdown 1 – Charli came back bigger and bolder with *Crash*, a big pop long-player as the final release of her major label deal. *Crash* delivered the singer/songwriter/producer her first number one album. It felt like the most interesting British pop artist in years finally got her dues. The live tour that followed revealed an artist at peak performance, dancing to an impressive standard with full pop-star production. No longer too alternative to be a main pop girl, it feels like all eyes are on Charli XCX for what comes next.

HANNAH EWENS

2022 THE YEAR OF THE LOO

Everyone who lived through it will remember the year 2020 for the rest of their lives, I should imagine. The first time wearing surgical gloves and masks to buy milk and chocolate from the corner shop, leaving your parcels out in the porch to 'decontaminate' when we didn't know better, the Black Lives Matter protests, that holiday season when we were told not to travel to spend it with our closest relatives ("We must, I'm afraid, look again at Christmas," said Boris Johnson from behind that blue-bannered pulpit). The year 2021 was a similarly eerie and uncomfortable petering out of everything that we'd been through the previous year. This year is one that stands alone in its singular strangeness.

We are, in essence, past the pandemic now, free to enjoy the year we thought we might have in 2021. We could engage in casual sex, festival season and pints at the pub in an unbearable heatwave — 40 degrees in London with no air-conditioning units in homes — portending how the climate crisis will impact our nation, one governed by leaders with their heads turned toward personal profit. Plenty of other events have occurred. Across the pond, the Supreme Court overturned the nationwide legal right to abortion in the biggest roll-back in women's rights we've seen in the

US in decades. Daily life in Britain, already hanging by a thread, genuinely began to break down — railways, public services, the housing crisis, a summer of strikes, bill prices allowed to skyrocket by the government — culminating in a scary reality for the cost-of-living crisis that looks to consume public life for the rest of the decade. In just two months, we've had three Tory prime ministers. Liz Truss was our shortest-serving PM ever, lasting only 45 days before conceding that she was not remotely up to the job — but not before tanking the economy and bringing the pound to its all-time low against the dollar. And I don't know if you heard the news, but the Queen died. We did what we know how to do best as Brits: we queued and queued — on this occasion to see her coffin. Everything stopped for a day to mourn her.

But we're used to that now. The coronavirus pandemic may be over in the form we knew it but now we live in the knowledge that our personal and collective normality can be shattered at any time, that our safety in both of those regards is not being supported by "those in charge" and that, colloquially speaking, the adults are not coming to save us. As that settles in our psyche, something doesn't feel right. The deranged mood of the country is potent, so let's attempt to review our year in UK society and culture.

HANNAH EWENS

TRANS WRITING BLOSSOMED ON THE BOOK SCENE

BY BARRY PIERCE

In many ways, 2022 felt like the year of the underdog in the book world. Although it lacked blockbusters, fringe fiction flourished and works in translation soared. But which trends will we look back on from our lofty armchairs and think, 'That was so 2022'?

Themes pushed boundaries

Fiction took a turn for the extreme. Ottessa Moshfegh gave us *Lapvona*, exploring rape, incest and cannibalism. Depending on the review, it was either a grungy, dirty romp or the most debased work this side of the Marquis de Sade. Sayaka Murata of *Convenience Store Woman* fame provided some competition with the moral code-breaking *Life Ceremony*, a collection of stories about cannibalism, humans being kept as pets and skin being worn as clothing. Chelsea G. Summers kept the cannibalism thread going with *A Certain Hunger*, a dark comedy about a food critic with a ravenous appetite. So much for an 'easy read'.

Plot became replaced by 'vibes'

Anyone who's read a hyped literary release over the past few years (think minimalist covers, double-spaced text and a neat 210 pages) will have noticed that plot, the thing books used to have, has been surreptitiously replaced by characters just vibing it out. The 'vibes' novel came into its own this year, however, with the likes of Elif Batuman's *Either/Or* (her sequel to trendsetting vibes novel, *The Idiot*), Sean Thor Conroe's *Fuccboi*, Jessica Au's *Cold Enough for Snow*, and Sarah Thankam Mathews' *All This Could Be Different*. There was even a vibes short-story collection, Saba Sams' brilliant *Send Nudes*.

The best new books... were the old ones

Reissues are (literally) nothing new, but they dominated 2022. This summer, all the hottest reads were 30 years old and many of their authors were long dead. People sat poolside with their Natalia Ginzburgs and their Annie Ernauxs. Cookie Mueller showed us how to party 33 years after her death. Jane Bowles' *Two Serious Ladies* garnered brand-new reviews, on top of the ones it originally received from Truman Capote and Tennessee Williams. It makes you wonder why new authors bother...

Trans writing hit the mainstream

2022 will be remembered as an epochal year for trans writing. Picador pronounced Imogen Binnie's *Nevada* a modern classic when it reissued the cult novel. Faber published *You Made a Fool of Death with Your Beauty*, the latest work by non-binary trans novelist Akwaeke Emezi. The paperback edition of Shon Faye's *The Transgender Issue* topped the charts and has remained a bestseller. And that's before we mention other new titles from 2022: *Summer Fun* by Jeanne Thornton, *None of the Above* by Travis Alabanza, *Manhunt* by Gretchen Felker-Martin, *Please Miss* by Grace Lavery, *Morbid Obsessions* by Frankie Miren and Alison Rumfitt... the list goes on.

THE YEAR THAT LIVE MUSIC RETURNED

BY LAUREN O'NEILL

There's a part in 'Scott Street' by Phoebe Bridgers where she describes an encounter with an old friend who's in a band and is feeling left behind because everyone else is *"getting married"*.

When I heard Bridgers sing these few lines to a packed-out John Peel tent on the Friday of Glastonbury this year, a strange thing happened: I burst into tears. Obviously, Bridgers is an affecting performer whose songs have quickly become part of the official Sad Girl Canon, so it's not surprising that a listener might cry — but I'd seen her play on many occasions before and those lyrics had never particularly stung in the past.

This time, however, the circumstances were a little different. Suddenly, after years of shuttered summers and winters spent sitting in parks, wearing my biggest coats and ensuring I was at least two metres away from all of the people I love most in the world, I found myself back at Glastonbury like I was 25 again and nothing had changed at all. 'Scott Street' is a song about arrested development, about slowly watching everyone else grow up around you while you stay the same. Suddenly, I couldn't help but apply its words to myself and to everything that had happened to me during the three years away: everything I had had ahead of me when I was last at the festival, and everything I'd failed at since. I had never felt so old and so young at the same time.

It's unsurprising that it took live music to draw these emotions out of me; it's a stirring, mood-altering thing to experience at the best of times. But in 2022, it seemed particularly intense. At every music event I went to, whether it was a festival or just a bog-standard gig,

FEEL SO REAL Live concerts witnessed an outpouring of emotion

it felt like everyone, having been kept away from these spaces for so long, was processing the previous few years in different — but equally outwardly emotional — ways.

This year, feelings were as heavy in the musical air as ElfBar smoke and dry ice — from the many, many reports of tears at Self Esteem concerts, her take on contemporary femininity so comforting to such a lot of people, to the young fans screaming venues down at previously unheard volumes for artists like Lorde, Mitski and Harry Styles.

Indeed, these newer music fans have had it especially rough: lockdowns meant that for many teenagers, 2022 symbolised a first foray into live music, after having to make do with online footage and TikToks of favourite artists. The outpouring of emotion, therefore, is understandable and even moving. You can watch videos on your phone so much you start inflecting your sentences with the word "guys", but it's nothing compared to the live experience, and the realisation that screaming because you love something, in this space, this holy church, is OK. What a powerful thing to understand for the first time.

"FEELINGS WERE AS HEAVY AS ELFBAR SMOKE AND DRY ICE"

For these younger fans, then, as well as for the slightly more seasoned among us, one of 2022's best tricks by far was becoming the year that saw live music make its proper return. As such, it was also an important reminder of everything we get from going to concerts: joy that is both communal and individual, catharsis, discernment about our own lives — and a dark room to cry in, if you need one. ®

THE YEAR THAT

SEX PARTIES WENT MAINSTREAM

BY FLORENCE BARK, SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS EXPERT AND CO-HOST OF *FCKS GIVEN* PODCAST**

As someone who talks endlessly and openly about sex for a living, I had long wanted to attend a sex party. And this year there was something in the air that made it feel like the perfect time to experience one.

One Sunday around a month ago, I took off my casual wear and put on some fishnets, a tiny thong and a very see-through mesh top. With a couple of friends in tow, I arrived at Crossbreed, a queer sex party based in Hackney Wick, at around 5pm. The entrance was tucked away behind black tarpaulin-covered fences, next to some bars and a brewery whose oblivious patrons were tucking into drinks and food. As I stepped inside the venue after a rigorous vetting process, my senses were completely flooded by the sight of half-naked bodies clad in leather, latex, PVC, lingerie, you name it — if it was sexy, people were wearing it. I was instantly exhilarated by the atmosphere of freedom. My evening was spent getting to know new people, dancing to techno and, of course, having good sex. Doing so in this space enabled me to safely explore corners of my sexuality I hadn't before and, most of all, to be freaky and free.

Fellow party-goers at the event told me it had never been this busy. The founder of Crossbreed, Kiwi, informed me that their attendee population has also "diversified immensely". "We are seeing more young and previously closeted queers finding home and sanctuary in our spaces," they say. "The community seems very united and caring and I think shares values beyond just 'ooh, sex party'."

A few years ago, I only heard about sex parties in very specific circles such as in the kink world and from stories of random and outlandish trips to Berlin. They had a notably sleazy reputation. Now, friends that are usually very strait-laced and monogamous are curious about them.

It's hard to imagine a surge in people happily swapping bodily fluids taking place after a pandemic, but strangely we can't get involved quickly enough. Sex parties have never been so mainstream and, if you're interested, you'd better start following venues' social media accounts — nights are selling out fast.

This dramatic shift started a few years ago alongside — and partly as a result of — the UK's expanding queer party scene. You may be aware of fairly new events like Pussy Palace or Club Quarantine, which provide safe spaces for LGBTQs to express themselves and to wear whatever they want.

As well as popular DJs now existing in these sexual safe spaces, fashion has also changed the way we view sex. With brands like Balenciaga styling full latex looks, kink has been a visual trend for at least a couple of years. Although this doesn't directly influence sex party attendance, it does ignite a desire to explore your sexuality through clothing, which ultimately makes us feel more at ease wearing kink attire and to find spaces where it's acceptable to do so.

"MY EVENING WAS SPENT HAVING SEX"

I asked my Instagram followers why they go to sex parties. Their reasons included the ability to express themselves in queer-friendly spaces, to "meet likeminded people" and "exploring their relationship to their sexuality". Although these answers weren't surprising, what was interesting was the type of person opening up and having these conversations in the first place. You know Sam and Anna from next door? Well, they went to a sex party last weekend. Previously, those who might have only gossiped about sex with friends now feel comfortable enough to explore sensuality with strangers.

In addition to conversations around sex becoming more accessible due to social media, the internet, and my podcast *F**ks Given*, we have had a serious wake-up call. And that is to live your life fully and enjoy it while you can, because in this strange, unpredictable decade for the world, absolutely anything can happen that takes away our liberty. After being held back, we want a taste of hedonism. I'm personally excited by the change in attitudes towards sex. Hopefully it's the start of something quite beautiful. And by that, I mean 30-person orgies for all. ®

ISTOCK, AMAZON STUDIOS

CATHOLICISM MADE A MINI COMEBACK

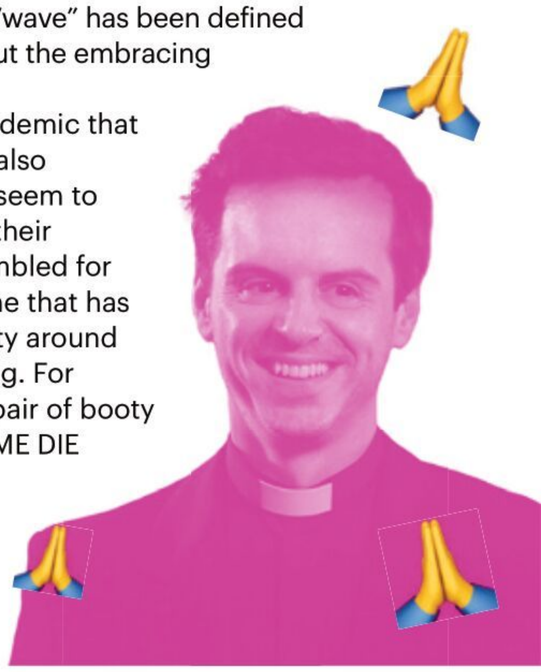
BY EMMA GARLAND

Catholicism has always lent itself to transgression. Its flamboyant aesthetics and patriarchal power structure have inspired everything from Renaissance art to Nunsploitation films, and the Met Gala to the relationship between Fleabag and her Hot Priest. Those raised in repressive Catholic environments also have a tendency to reclaim its signifiers, whether it's Chicano youths wearing rosary beads as an accessory in a deeply segregated Los Angeles in the 30s/40s to goths wearing a little dangly cross in their ear. In the past 12 months, though, we've gone from political and sexual subversion in art, film and TV to young women selling $5 absolutions on Depop.

The rise of cultural Catholicism in 2022 has been explored from a few different angles. In March, *i-D* noted how fashion trends were reflecting a "cool girl gone quasi Catholic" pipeline, with predominantly white designers toying with Catholic signifiers partly due to their lack of "overt racial ties". In June, *Vox* described it as an "alt status symbol" whose appeal lies "somewhere in between irony and earnestness, but leans toward the latter". In August, a less generous op-ed in the *New York Times* snarkily called it the city's "hottest club", noting its appeal among the small, Manhattan-based art scene commonly nicknamed "Dimes Square". Each piece noted the countercultural appeal of Catholicism, with *Vox* commenting that the history of Roman and Eastern denominations in the US — cutting across Latino, Italian, Irish and Slavic immigrant communities — will always make it "alternative". The same goes for the UK, where the Church of England is inextricably bound to the monarchy and has the closest relationship to the state.

For the everyday internet user, though, Catholicism has asserted itself most visibly through meme pages and merch stores. Think baby tees that say GOD'S FAVOURITE, the infamous white Praying bikini with the words Father and Son on each tit and Holy Ghost on the crotch, or Instagram meme pages that map religious doctrine onto images reflecting a society in decline (see, for example, someone pouring a can of Monster energy drink over a bowl of communion wafers). Like astrology before it, Catholicism seems to be acting as a proxy for a lack of understanding of or control over an increasingly chaotic world. It provides a comforting framework — a way to navigate personal stress, or big questions about life — if not a practising faith. It's not surprising that this new Catholic "wave" has been defined not by the rejection of tradition but the embracing of irrationality.

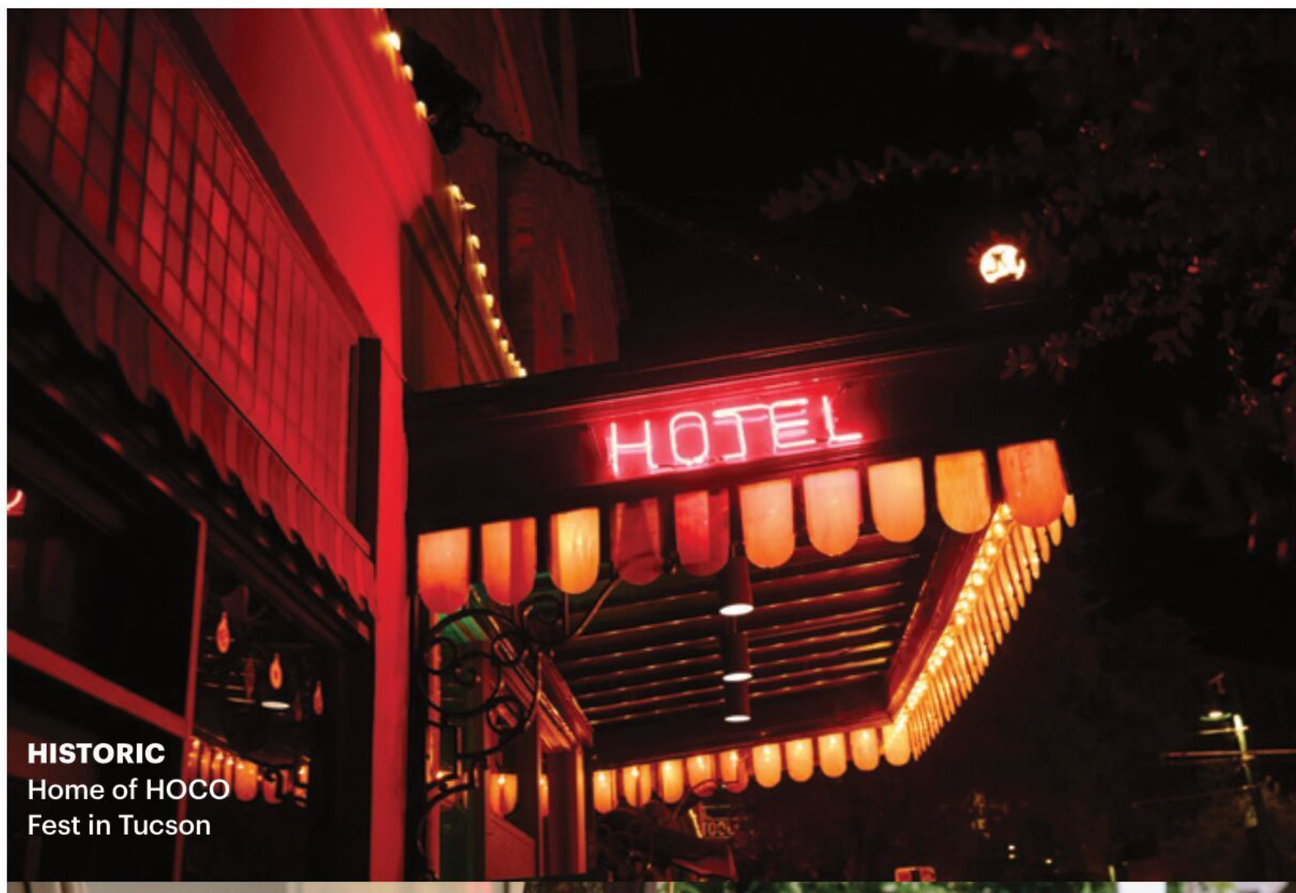
Against the backdrop of a pandemic that has killed millions globally while also exposing how few governments seem to be in the business of protecting their citizens, many people have scrambled for something to hold on to. For some that has involved forging a new personality around meditation, running, or Elden Ring. For others, it's meant throwing on a pair of booty shorts that say GOD WON'T LET ME DIE and claiming 'Tulsa Jesus Freak' by Lana Del Rey as a hymn. ®



GOD SQUAD ***Fleabag*****'s sexy priest, Andrew Scott**

THE YEAR THAT FESTIVALS HAD TO GET SUSTAINABLE

BY HANNAH EWENS PHOTOS BY JESSE DEFLORIO



HISTORIC
Home of HOCO Fest in Tucson

It's still pushing 30 degrees in the early hours of the morning, and on a stage in the large courtyard of a historic hotel, a man smoking a cigar in a cowboy hat and vest is playing a Latin remix of a Pitbull song. "If you're happy to be alive, make some noise," he shouts into the mic. People make some noise. "If you're surrounded by hot people, make some noise," he says and three times as big a sound erupts. It's true — everyone here is hot, well-dressed in an alternative or laid-back way and they are all carefree.

Next to the stage, a team of people take cups and rubbish from attendees and put them in the appropriate recycling bin. Local vendors pack everything away for the night: unwanted second-hand clothes, drinks made nearby and handmade jewellery. None of them paid a charge for being there. Earlier, people ate food on the patio at the hotel restaurant using its plates and cutlery. Soon members of the crowd will go upstairs to their cosy hotel bedroom or wander back home through the streets.

By most people's standards and certainly mine, HOCO Fest in Tucson, Arizona, is a specific utopia. Music, comfort, carefully curated *everything*, along with a sense of self-sustaining good energy that can only come from a community gathering and respecting each other enough to leave no trace of harm behind.

The following day, the same music lovers were one block away at a sustainability summit held as part of the festival. A musician, Caloncho, plays a video diary entry on a big screen of himself at a venue explaining how he tours sustainably: no single-use plastics; bring your own coffee and beer mugs; buy a reusable, one-dollar fork-and-spoon combo; on your rider, ask venues for batch meals cooked for everyone rather than lots of pre-packaged individual items like salads and drinks. Previously, Caloncho says, he educated his followers on mindfulness and mental health but then he realised everything is connected and how vital it is to spread information about how to reduce our environmental cost. Another woman who organised a music festival in Mexico tells the crowd she had an obvious lightbulb moment: why *do* we — organisers and festival-goers — bring so much to a festival if it's going to end up as rubbish? The only actual answer to that, of course, is because music festivals are run like businesses, to make as much profit as possible.

HOCO is a music festival that has built itself around sustainability and newer ones cropping up across the globe are following suit. Ever since Woodstock, music festivals and outdoor touring have romanticised or outwardly endorsed ideals of an environmental utopia — flower crowns, being *outside* in fields, and open spaces that facilitate the use of hallucinogens and mushrooms — but as the decades have rolled on, their environmental footprint has become larger and less easy to ignore. After every major festival, thousands of tents and sleeping bags are left behind, fields and valleys are left full of rubbish and grotesque numbers of plastic bottles are used.

"WHY DO WE BRING SO MUCH TO A FESTIVAL?"

An awareness around the environmental cost of festivals and tours has been building since 2016. A UK study found that in 2015, just five artists collectively generated the CO_2 emissions of the equivalent of one million people per year. One tour alone can result in the use of 18,720 plastic bottles a year. Since tours or festivals are one contained event or a series of events run by a collaborative group of companies, there is little excuse for this issue not being tackled.

The music industry is only now truly feeling the pressure to respond for two reasons. Firstly, 2022 was the first year that festivals were properly running as normal, post-pandemic. Secondly, climate change has become a serious global discussion point as we sail past any measures of being able to turn back the clock from climate disaster.

"Being conscious of the environment has come into the forefront of everyone's minds, and it's become a tipping point in people's expectations of festivals and events," the organisers of Green Man festival in Wales told me. "If these sustainable practices aren't met, then the audience will simply start looking for alternatives."

This year, Billie Eilish held a series of events at the O2 to educate the music industry and fans on both the environmental impact of touring and what can be done to mitigate that. Some parts focused on what we can all do in our day-to-day lives to help and feel some element of accountability and control over the climate crisis. She also managed to

PHOTO READY The Mainliners at Hotel Congress, where the festival is held

convince the O2 arena to go fully vegan for nearly a week for the duration of the event.

Other festivals that already held sustainability as a core value made big shifts this year. In 2022, all of Green Man's power came from hydrogen, solar or hydro-treated vegetable oil (a fossil-free alternative to diesel). A host of other initiatives were introduced, like refugee donation points for unwanted tents or camping equipment to encourage people to not leave these things behind, and only using local beer, ale and cider to reduce the carbon impact of transportation. They also banned all single-use plastic on site.

Helsinki's popular Flow Festival launched a research project with an environmental research company D-mat to better understand the impacts of festival production on a deeper level than just carbon emissions. "Additionally, this year we decided to cut off red meat and poultry from our menus for environmental reasons but also for ethical ones, and to encourage people to make better choices in their own lives," Suvi Kallio, the MD of Flow Festival says.

It's clear from being at HOCO Fest that it's easier to run a sustainable festival if you're starting from scratch (HOCO is still a relatively young and nimble festival). Everything is under your control, and you can scale what you're creating at a pace that is manageable. By capping growth and not operating to make a significant profit, HOCO is able to waive vendor fees, meaning that the local community is genuinely benefitting in a big way from taking part in the festival. The hotel's capacity loosely commands how many people can attend, which restricts the event's footprint. Organiser Matt Baquet tells me that a day ticket costs $50 and he has no intention of increasing it. This year he has tracked every possible flight booked across performers, staff and guests, and on the day following the festival he and his team will plant a tree on Tucson land for every single one.

On the final night of HOCO, I met Chad Herzog, a director of performing arts, who has a lifetime of experience in scheduling music events. He recently returned from the Edinburgh Fringe festival in Scotland which was, he felt, problematic in how overgrown and expensive it had become. "People were even struggling to find accommodation." Everything shifts when you plan an event at scale, he said, but somewhere like this, you can feel its very heartbeat.

TV HAD REMAKES ON REPEAT

BY LAUREN O'NEILL

In 2022, the era of revamping, and rebooting that has gradually wrapped its fingers around mainstream cinema's throat for the past five years — via sprawling superhero epics, origin stories, remakes and whatever is going on with the *Halloween* franchise — felt like it finally arrived in the world of TV.

Although this situation has been brewing for a while (returning shows of late have ranged from the woeful new *Gossip Girl* series to *Twin Peaks* via the *Sex and the City* update *And Just Like That...*), it has stepped up a gear recently, with even the most middling fare being dragged out of retirement — *Pretty Little Liars: Original Sin*, anyone?

On British TV, however, we'll have to wait until next year to view the spoils of this somewhat jarring trend. Over the past few months, various channels have announced a number of programmes first popular in the 90s and 00s that will make a comeback. As such, 2023 will see British channels screen born-again versions of *Big Brother* (ITV), *Survivor* (BBC), *Challenge Anneka* (Channel 5 getting in on the action), *The Osbournes* (BBC) and *I'd Do Anything*, the BBC One talent show where contestants compete for a lead role in a West End musical (I have been crowing for a redo of this for years).

Broadcasters seemingly believe that this race to the bottom will help them tap into a nostalgic millennial audience that was previously lost to streaming, and also seem to be competing with

CELEBRITY BB STAR Gemma Collins

each other to rehash the most random shows, led by the internet and the entertaining but low-hanging fruit of meme culture.

As always, however, it is short-sighted. Of course it will be novel to watch *Big Brother* again, but when TV has emerged as one of the best, most complex storytelling mediums of our times as film has succumbed to Marvel oversaturation, it all just feels like a bit of a waste.

AESTHETIC TRENDS BECAME MEANINGLESS

BY HANNAH EWENS

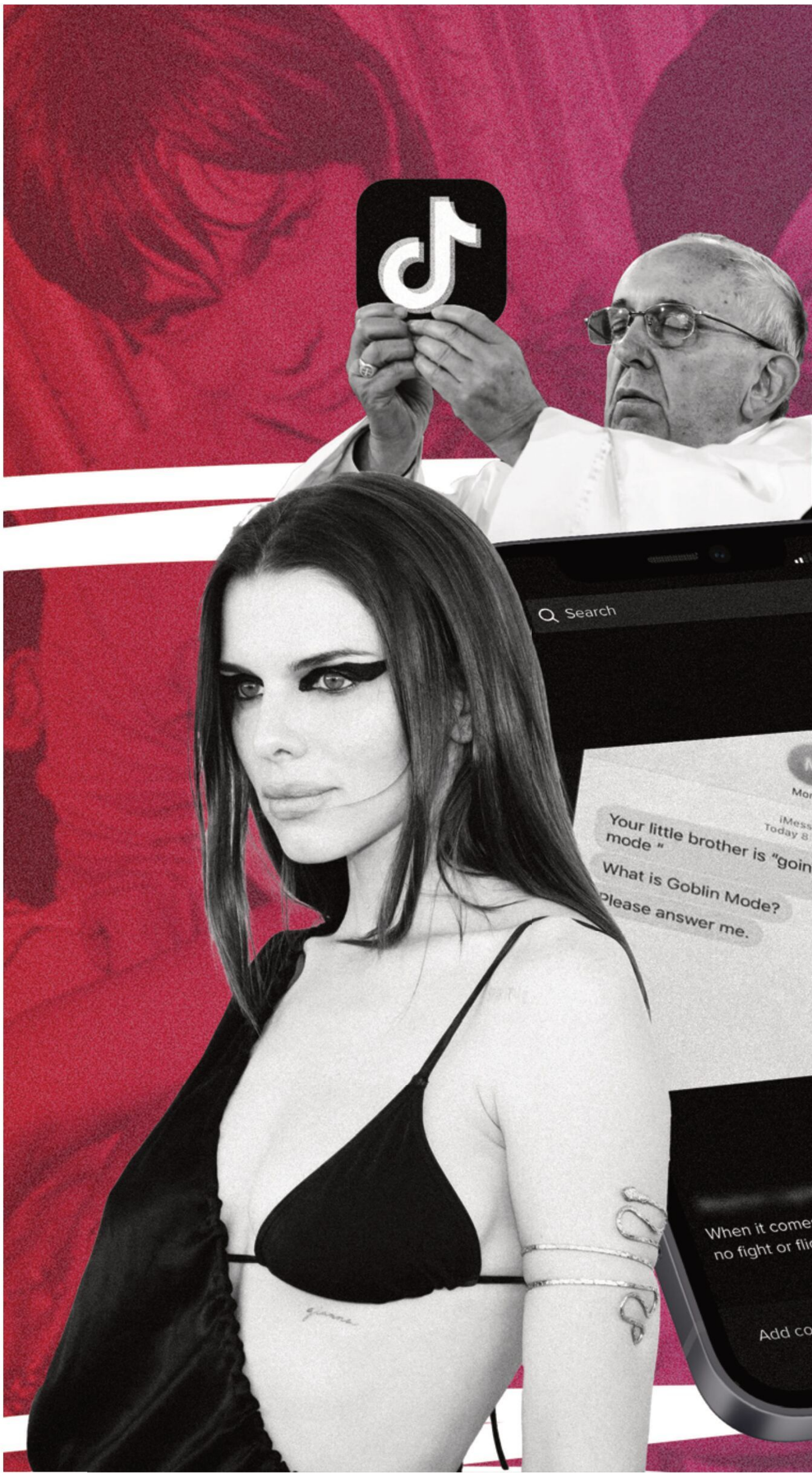
When TikTok became the new social media platform for app-literate tweens, music fans and doe-eyed influencers, subculture academics were elated. It looked as though TikTok could replicate what we saw with Myspace, the community-driven site that birthed a distinct and popular "scene" culture and a new alternative wave of emos wearing black eyeliner, heavy fringes and chaotic neon. But just because the types of micro aesthetic trends you've read about here have been dominant on the internet in 2022, as they were in 2021, that doesn't translate into an enormous amount of meaning and *mattering* across the board.

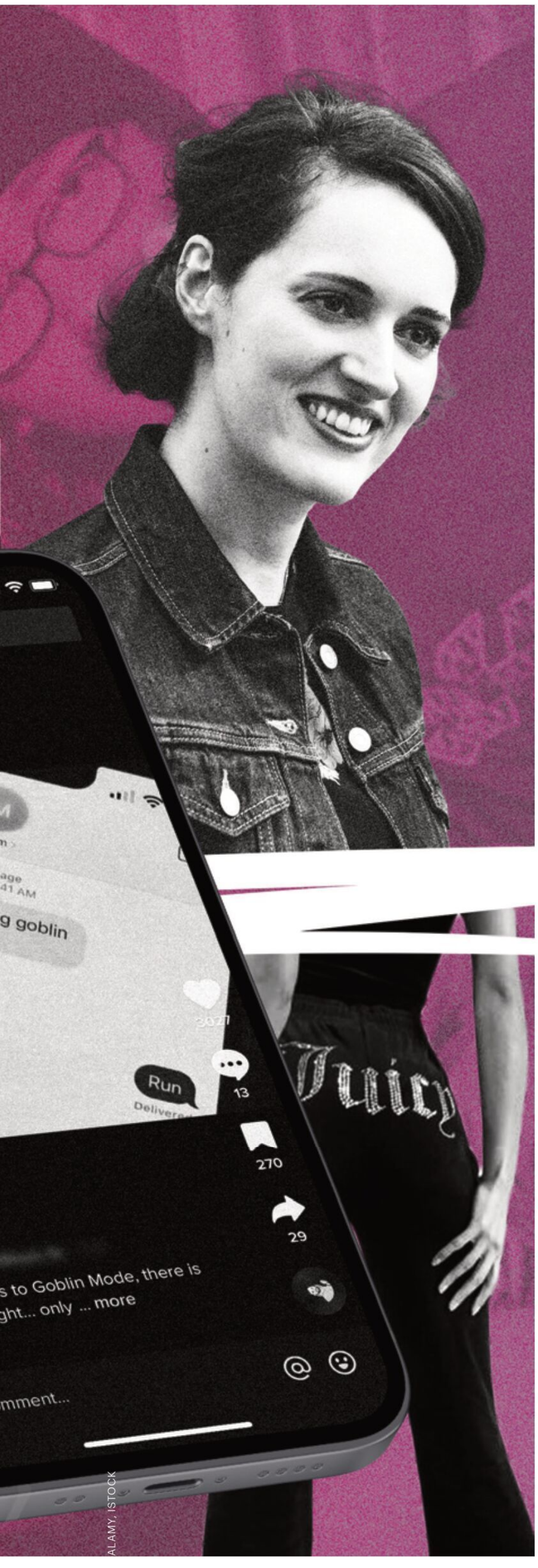
Most of them exist for people to showcase specific fashion, homewares, films and behaviours that, grouped together, amount to little more than a "mood" or wry inside joke. This is a joke, however, that doesn't hinge on body language, gags or IRL observation but on the fact that you have to be on the internet enough to get it.

If aesthetic trends don't go much further than a Pinterest mood board, then why are they spoken and written about as though they're subcultures? They could live and die on an app over a few weeks, but underfunded culture journalism means that bloggers are stuck to a desk without thorough editors to oversee their work. Tech journalism that focuses on social media still isn't taken as seriously as it should be so there are few writers doing deep dives into this world or contextualising these micro trends in a way that makes sense. The people we do have covering this world are millennial bloggers who recently aged out of youth culture, and Gen Z bloggers who don't understand the historical context of subcultures or how interesting movements grow from community and gathering. What we're left with is lazy coverage and little understanding of what these things mean across social media, new media websites and traditional media.

We have aesthetic trend fatigue. If anything, this year we realised that the existence of most of these trends, which have been knocking around for a couple of years or more, are a "vibe" rather than something tangible. What they do reflect en masse is just how much choice we have in music, fashion, film and TV now and the strength of nostalgia Gen Z shows for decades they never lived through. For better or worse, it's reflective of how fractured youth culture is in 2022. ®

'mood' -core





ALAMY, ISTOCK

THE YEAR THAT TIKTOK WENT WEIRD

BY IONE GAMBLE

Trends, once created and enforced by the culture press and celebrities, have grown into an ever-evolving, unpredictable beast with the rise of TikTok. In 2022, the app grew from a hub reigned by choreographed dance routines to a place that loomed large over our society: dictating the celebrity gossip we consume, the music we listen to and the clothes we wear. No longer do the same cultural moments stick around for months or even years. Just like the throwaway nature of a TikTok video, users of the app rinse and recycle trends like they're going out of fashion. 2022 will be remembered as the year that we saw more micro-movements than ever before. Here are five that, five years from now, we may just remember.

CATHOLIC CHIC

Forgive us, father, for Gen Z are trying to repent for our sins. This summer, Catholicism took over TikTok, with users creating content on how to get the Catholic look and searching for meaning in a higher place. Both ironic and earnest all at once, Gen Z Catholicism isn't the subversion of teens from eras gone by. They aren't necessarily adopting Catholic-coded visuals and messaging to subvert or shock older generations, but pushing back at the ever-increasing chaos of the world we live in using the order and ritual of organised religion.

BIMBOISM

Picture a bimbo in your head. She likely has blonde hair, a well-endowed chest, and is wearing a velour Juicy Couture tracksuit. The phrase, popularised in the early 00s, was used to launch hate campaigns against *Playboy* bunnies and heiresses such as Paris Hilton. But instead of fighting against the label and its anti-intellectual associations, these aforementioned starlets became the most air-headed versions of themselves that they could be. 2022 was the year that bimboism made its comeback, with TikTok users reclaiming the aesthetic to prove that beauty and brains are not mutually exclusive. Self-confessed bimbos on the app use their hyper-femininity to create content spotlighting the issues important to them, from racial injustice and feminism to sex-worker positivity and communism.

DISSOCIATIVE FEMINISM

Ever felt as though your life is spiralling out of control? Maybe you relate to *Fleabag* a little *too* much, or spend your evenings lit by the blue glow of your phone, doom-scrolling to glean meaning from this hell we're living in. At the beginning of this year, on TikTok, a group of feminists decided that gender-equality through positive change was no longer viable — and instead decided to burrow into their most nihilistic tendencies. These young women consider 'flawed' female characters to be their idols. Their beliefs centre on the lack of representation for 'unlikeable' women in our current cultural discourse, with dissociative feminists using their own messiness to push back on the idea that women, still, must have it all together to be taken seriously.

INDIE SLEAZE

It's 15 years since *Skins* first aired and changed teenagers' lives across the UK, but Gen Z discovered the indie music that came to soundtrack millennials' formative years. One cursory glance at the app and you're likely to stumble across edits of Alexa Chung's best style moments, fan-cams of bands long relegated to the near-past, and more party pictures lensed by Cobra Snake than there were Tumblr it girls. Gen Z are discovering ballet pumps, brightly coloured tights, and leopard-print fur coats; observing, through sartorial choices, the pre-iPhone hedonism of an era they never had the chance to experience themselves.

GOBLIN MODE

Some of us found the lockdown lifestyle a little more comfortable than we'd like to admit. Staying in your pyjamas all day, not showering for weeks, and losing your hairbrush under a mountain of mess became *the* look of spring 2022. Ignited by a fake Julia Fox meme in the wake of her breakup with Kanye West, whoever decided to craft the false headline that their relationship broke down as he didn't enjoy her going 'goblin mode' probably had no idea that they would inspire a micro-cultural movement. TikTok users began rebranding being a slob, proudly showing off their most ugly moments under the guise of embracing goblin mode. For a few short weeks, the internet went entirely feral, and just as lockdown restrictions were lifted, we embraced our most disgusting selves.

"FOR A FEW SHORT WEEKS, THE INTERNET WENT FERAL"

THE YEAR THAT MUSIC BOOKS

GOT NOSTALGIC

FOR THE 'GOOD OLD DAYS'

BY HANNAH EWENS

The 2010s felt like my lucky years. I read the now-defunct *Rookie Magazine* run by Tavi Gevinson, a website and annual that used a diverse roster of girls to cover music and pop culture. As someone who wanted to write for a living, the music press was the only place that welcomed me with its lowly entry point: listening to albums and having some opinions. There was insidious sexism from male journalists and PRs, but the presence of other girls and young women doing the same work was proof that if I were good enough, someone would read my words and enjoy them. As popular music diversified from being rock and pop dominant, hip-hop, grime, rap and alternative pop rose to give voice to frustrations and pleasures while celebrating different cultures. Genre dissolved and anyone could listen to anything (practically for free). The result was that all music mattered and seemed to have its place in the world. The digital media boom provided commentary and I was a part of that. Coverage was irreverent, smart, funny and occasionally stupid and rude. Sometimes the blogs were excitable and captured the spirit of fandom better than music writing had before. As social media had only just begun to threaten music journalism's importance, we helped bridge the gap between artists and fans who now sought closeness to artists through their phone. Those *Rookie* writers and editors I read have now grown up to lead music coverage at global publications and papers.

You wouldn't gather any of this from music books, which favour rock'n'roll and the 20th century. This year, I've heard and read that "things used to be better" frequently, as cultural nostalgia reaches a critical high, our lives increasingly take place at home and online, the economic barrier to entry in the arts — or indeed living a fulfilling and comfortable life — keeps talent out, and in these conditions record labels are unsure of how to make a star. It's easy to view everything, including music, as "content" because there is simply so much of it, everywhere.

The inexorably enduring idea of the good old days of rock and a more vibrant music press to document it has been the theme of British music books in 2022.

Barbara Charone's *Access All Areas* is a scrappy and conversational ode to the past. As you would expect from an American music journalist turned industry legend, public relations giant and friend to the stars, the zingers detailing decadence and drugs keep coming. Take this on the country's favourite Class A: "I must confess that by now I had developed quite a fondness for cocaine. It was everywhere, the quality was great, it wasn't too pricey and it certainly aided communication between us scribes and rock stars." Or this, on private members' club The Groucho: "One minute you were drinking in an upstairs bar and indulging in the odd line of cocaine and the next they were kicking you out at 3am." It is repeated outright that this musical showbiz world was better before. "It really was a golden age for journalism," Charone writes of *Smash Hits* and *NME* in the 90s.

Similarly, ex-*Q* editor Ted Kessler's memoir *Paper Cuts: How I Destroyed the British Music Press and Other Misadventures* brims with humorous anecdotes about the glory days of Britpop and 00s indie, from coming up on a pill in front of Aphex Twin to spontaneously calling Noel Gallagher's hotel room to secure an interview. That, he argues, was the last time artists had the guts to say interesting things and journalists had proper access to write those quotes up. What this book does that others don't is outline how media companies like Bauer, who owned *Q*, failed to modernise and monetise the shift from print to the internet. *Q* magazine never had a functioning website, even when it closed in 2020, so you couldn't read any of its culture journalism online. *Paper Cuts* is the perfect title for such a well-written book: working in music magazines will draw just enough blood to be self-injuring, irritating and disappointing.

The problem with Paul Gorman's thorough and lengthy *Totally Wired: The Rise and Fall of the Music Press* is that it ignores the latter part of its promise. Drama between editors and writers or rock stars and writers "acting like rock stars" fill its pages. The book essentially stops at the millennium, the date of the press's death, a demise that's barely explained. It doesn't investigate where the life remained, slowly being strangled after that, in the likes of VICE's enormously popular music platform, Noisey, which made music journalism about hip-hop, grime, pop and rock for a diverse millennial audience. It doesn't follow the rise of music blogging and well-functioning music websites, The Fader or Pitchfork. It ignores the success of hard rock magazines that weathered the 2010s, a bleak decade for the genre.

"NOSTALGIA IS A PERNICIOUS DRUG OF ITS OWN"

The theme exists as an undercurrent in other primary releases. Will Hodgkinson's *In Perfect Harmony: Singalong Pop In 70s Britain* is another heritage release that's by necessity backward-looking, its blurb describing it as a journey through the "most colour-saturated era in music". Ian Winwood's engaging interrogation of mental health in the music industry, *Bodies*, delves into the deterioration of the rock music press and is anchored by the decadent past (through showing how detrimental to many people's health it all is).

Although these are all useful documents and sometimes rich, entertaining reads, this publishing trend reinforces the reigning vision of post-millennium culture as empty. Naturally the primary (older) audience want to read about their music. Older music journalists

ALAMY, ISTOCK

want to write about their era. But nostalgia is a pernicious drug of its own.

One of my favourite TikTok videos of the year is a comedian's trailer for an imaginary British documentary on the 90s. "You wanna know about the 90s," he opens, guffawing at the camera. He plays the different stock characters you typically hear reminiscing on the excitement of the age. Cheap cocaine, Page 3, two iconic rival bands and the beautiful game: what could be better? Honestly — take me there, away from 2022, so I can have a taste. My generation has chaos and possibility too, but none of it tracks optimistically.

That is the implication of this books trend, really. This particular nostalgic argument is often adopted by generations to describe younger ones: people often think something is over when they're not reflected in it. But if we keep saying something is dead, what are we missing that is still alive or pushing upwards to exist? If everything really has died, then perhaps we should build something new or support those who have new visions in miserable circumstances. We might have fun yet.

INDIE SLEAZE *WASN'T* A THING

BY SELIM BULUT

As 2022 dawned, I was told that one trend would define the next 12 months: indie sleaze.

Articles in *Vogue* and *Elle*, via the *Guardian* and *GQ*, insisted that the sounds and styles of the 00s indie scene were due to make a comeback. Clean living was out, elegantly wasted was in. Girls would look like Kate Moss or Agyness Deyn, boys would dust off their leather jackets and pray they could still slide into skinny jeans. After two years of Covid lockdowns, we were all yearning to be dangerous, debaucherous, and downright messy. On nights out, we'd turn into part-time Cobrasnakes, doing flash photography on point-and-shoot cameras, preserving every mascara-smudged memory in 5.1 megapixels. It would be our own eternal Tales of the Jackalope.

But the year is drawing to a close now, and this indie sleaze revival has yet to pass. What gives?

Well, it could be because this 'comeback' was never real in the first place. Most of the articles published in January relied on the same two sources as proof of indie's imminent return: some videos by TikTok trend forecaster Mandy Lee, who insisted that there was an "obscene amount of evidence" that the old hipster aesthetic was returning (mostly, models were wearing wired headphones as a fashion statement), and the growing follower count of an Instagram account, @IndieSleaze, that curated images and videos from the era. Fairly flimsy stuff.

But indie's influence wasn't totally absent this year. Paramore cited Bloc Party as an inspiration on their new album *This Is Why*, while Rina Sawayama worked with the band's original drummer Matt Tong on her second album *Hold the Girl*. The Strokes, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, and M.I.A. all played major European festivals. In the summer, Gordon Raphael, who produced era-defining albums like *Is This It* and *Room on Fire*, published a memoir documenting his time on the scene. *Meet Me in the Bathroom*, Lizzy Goodman's oral history of New York City's drug-fuelled, cash-flush, politically incorrect 00s indie years, was turned into a documentary. Even 'landfill indie' bands like The Kooks reported that they were playing to their biggest crowds in years.

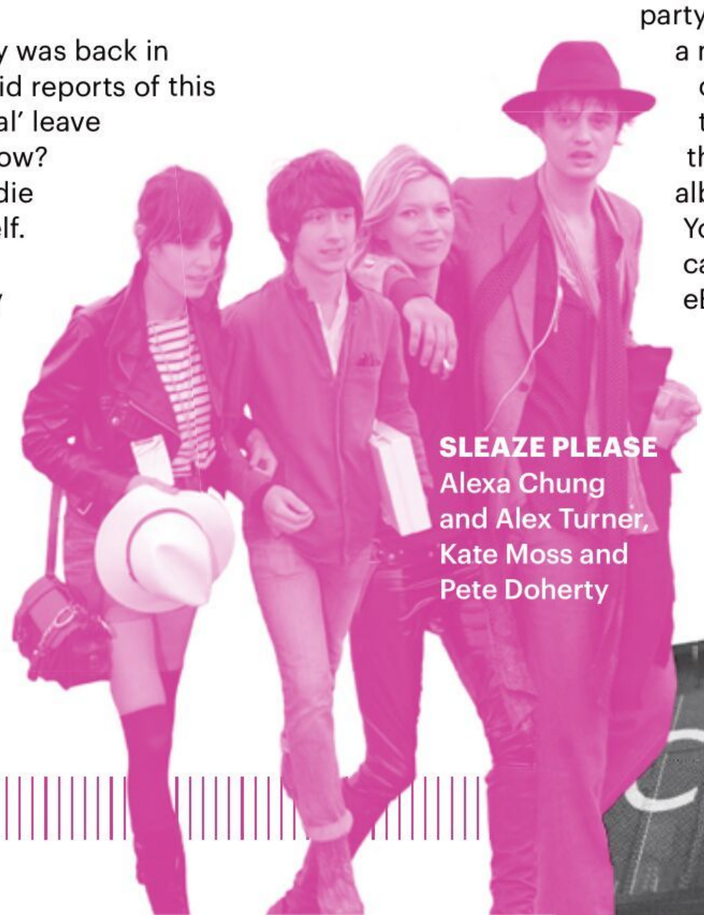
So if indie really was back in some form, why did reports of this 'indie sleaze revival' leave me feeling so hollow? It could be the 'indie sleaze' phrase itself. Although 'indie' was always a fairly generous term, as applicable to a no-mark band releasing 500 copies of their debut seven-inch single as it was to a major label pop group like The Killers, there were still different subscenes and warring tribes that fell under the wider indie umbrella. Grouping these related-yet-separate factions together steamrolled a lot of those original distinctions, reducing what were genuinely vibrant and creative DIY communities to inert caricatures.

But it could also be that the indie sleaze revival felt so small-time. Noughties indie was probably the last time a subculture based primarily around rock music held so much sway in the mainstream, seeming to be in conversation with art, fashion, film, television, magazines, internet culture and nightlife. If a cool band or an it model wore a certain outfit, a knock-off would usually appear in regional branches of Topshop a few months later. A buzzy new act might find their song in an episode of *Skins*, beamed into the living rooms of some 1.5 million people. You could go to almost any university city in the UK and find an indie disco, modelled on parties like Erol Alkan's weekly clubnight Trash, playing new songs and crossover anthems from rock bands and electro acts. Indie sleaze was hardly on the same scale. Where was the new 'Paper Planes', or 'Last Nite', or 'Giddy Stratospheres'? Why wasn't I seeing club kids in gold American Apparel leggings, or those Peter Pan lace collar dresses Alexa Chung used to wear?

Still, I can understand why so many writers hoped they could will this revival into existence. It was certainly more fun back then — the bottom hadn't yet fallen out of the economy, and cities like London and New York weren't totally gentrified and could still just about be an artistic playground for young and creative people (I'm sure the longstanding residents of Hackney and Brooklyn were less thrilled about this). And while I don't really buy that the 00s were a simpler time politically, it seemed easier to tune a lot of things out.

None of this really points to proof that a younger generation has suddenly taken to indie, though. Instead, it seems to be more about older millennials becoming less enthusiastic about new music, more alienated from the youth culture around them, and retreating to the relative comforts of the past. But you can't go back. You can't go to a warehouse party when it's been converted into a mixed-use residential, retail and office space. You can't smoke on the dancefloor. You can't debate the merits of the Mystery Jets' new album when the sterling is collapsing. You can't get EMA. You certainly can't use your EMA to buy M-kat on eBay. You can't start a band called Gay for Johnny Depp.

Indie sleaze can't solve the problems of the present. To borrow a popular phrase from the time — don't believe the hype.



SLEAZE PLEASE Alexa Chung and Alex Turner, Kate Moss and Pete Doherty

THE YEAR THAT

MISOGYNY WAS BACK IN FASHION

BY EMMA GARLAND

This time last year, very few people thought about Andrew Tate with any regularity — if at all. Now, he's inescapable. The former kickboxer and failed *Big Brother* contestant from Luton went from relative obscurity to a pound-shop Joe Rogan over the summer, trafficking primarily in extreme misogyny and get-rich-quick schemes aimed at young men. Following an influencer marketing model (membership to his online platform, Hustlers University, costs £39 per month), with an image along the lines of Kendall Roy via Dr. Evil, Tate shows up most often in viral videos, chuffing on a fat cigar while monologuing about how "females" belong in the home. His rise was rapid, but not unexpected.

Before he was permanently banned from the platform in August, TikTok videos under the Andrew Tate hashtag had more than 13 billion views. He also had millions of followers across Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and Facebook. *The Observer* reported that, in the month of July, there were more Google searches for his name than for Donald Trump. These numbers were partly boosted by copycat accounts designed to game the algorithm, plus a healthy share of detractors dunking on his engagement bait — "I can emotionally affect [my haters]," Tate admitted himself in one video. "All I have to do is go on the internet and say something obvious like women can't drive [...] And they have a mental breakdown." However, he also has a large, dedicated fanbase that speaks to a wider cultural trend towards misogyny.

In March, the Global Institute for Women's Leadership and the market research firm Ipsos conducted a survey on gender equality in 30 countries. The results show that a third of men think that feminism does more harm than good, and that traditional masculinity is under threat. This supports previous research by the charity HOPE not hate, which found that 50 per cent of young men in the UK believe that feminism has "gone too far". This is despite evidence that gender inequality has actually increased globally since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic due to its disproportionate impact on women.

In the UK, there has been a surge in domestic violence. Between April 2020 and February 2021, calls and contacts logged on Refuge's National Domestic Abuse Helpline (NDAH) went up by an average of 61 per cent. Meanwhile, spending on domestic violence refuges has been cut by nearly a quarter since 2010. Continued austerity, tax changes and benefits cuts have also thrust a greater number of women into homelessness and poverty, with the escalating cost of living crisis spelling more precariousness to come.

In September, Refuge called on the government and the then Prime Minister Liz Truss for help. Among their demands were raising Universal Credit in line with inflation and exempting survivors of domestic abuse from the benefit cap. So far, no such measures have been forthcoming.

"FEMICIDE RATES ARE ON THE RISE GLOBALLY"

Zoom out and the picture is similar around the world. Following the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, restrictions on women's movements, bodies and education have mounted steadily. In the US, the overturning of Roe v. Wade this summer has led to at least 14 states imposing abortion bans. And, most recently, women in Iran have been at the forefront of escalating protests sparked by the death in custody of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, who was detained for breaking hijab laws. Femicide rates are on the rise globally.

Politically and culturally, the landscape is sinister. Pop feminism dominated Western societies throughout the 2010s, paving the way for high-profile — often celebrity-focused — movements such as #MeToo and Time's Up. Meanwhile, women in general were becoming worse off. Even so, the dial of public opinion has swung the other way in response. Tate is a small figure in a vast online economy that also includes grifters like Dan Bilzerian, Jordan Peterson and Roosh Valizadeh, whose rhetoric about what men *deserve* appeals to those who feel uneasy in the face of social change and economic downturn. It seems like everywhere you look these days there's a dude with a crap beard and a six-figure net worth ranting about the "war on men". In reality, though, they're bottom feeders in the world's lurch towards the far right. ®

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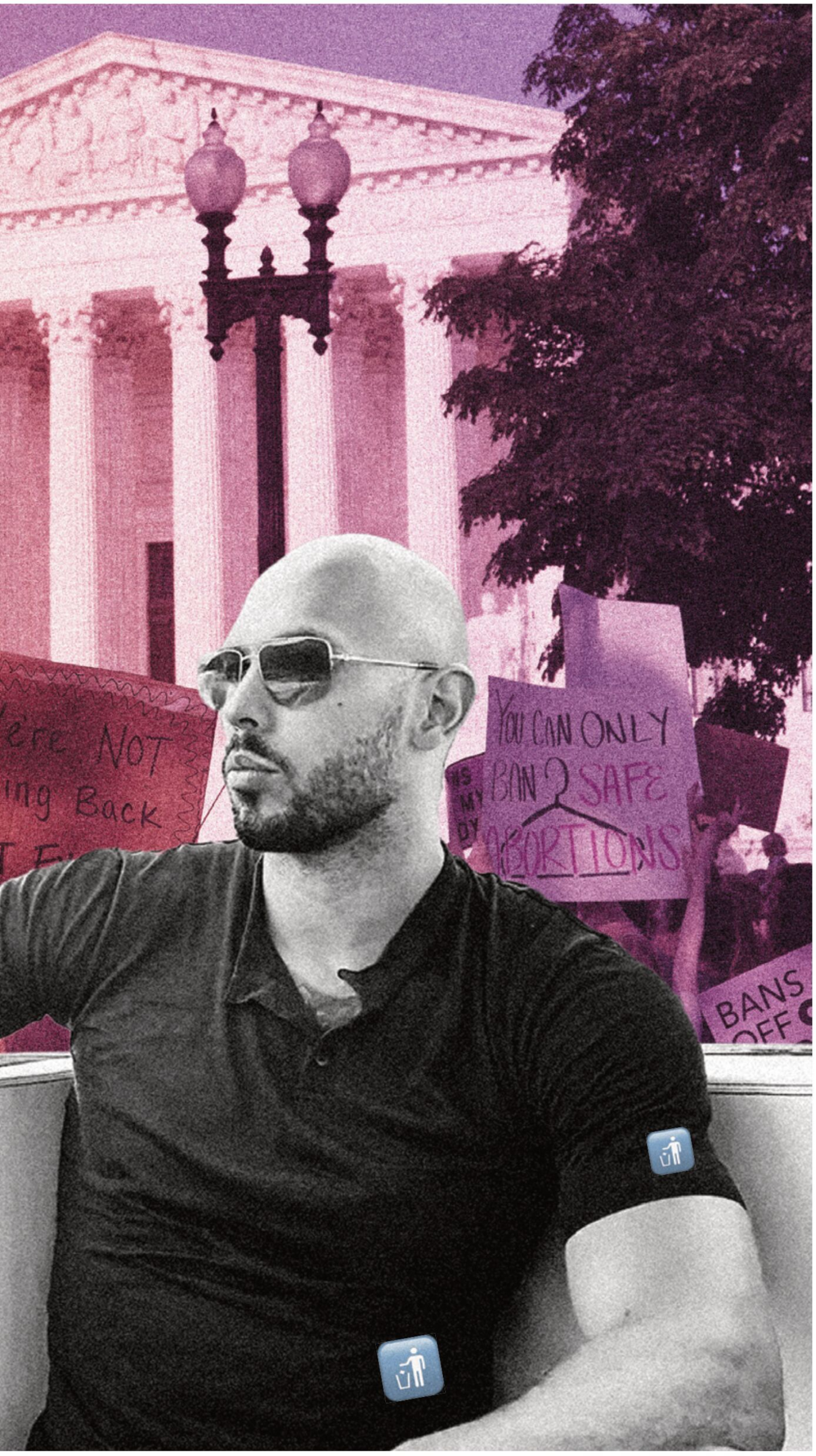


VICTORY Ecstasy as the Lionesses celebrate

FOOTBALL FINALLY CAME HOME

BY NICK REILLY

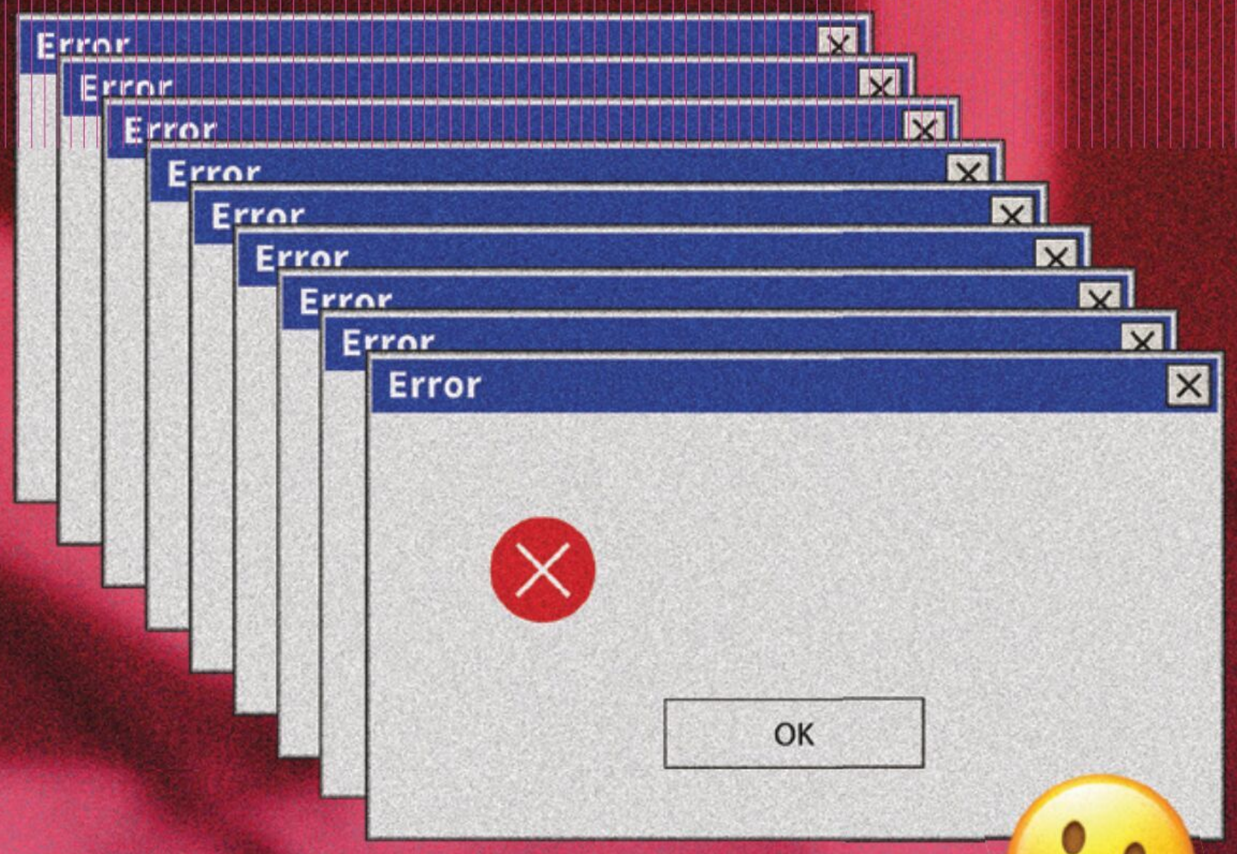
If you tuned into BBC One on the morning of 1 August, you'd have seen a team of young female footballers sporting all the signs of a heroic hangover for the ages. Behind the comforting shield of a bucket hat and sunglasses, 25-year-old Leah Williamson spoke for the whole group when she admitted to feeling a "little rough". In fairness, Williamson and her mates had every reason to overdo it the night before. Less than 24 hours previously, she had captained England to victory against Germany at Euro 2022.

After all those (50-plus) years of hurt, the Lionesses made it possible for football, at long last, to come home. Williamson may have led the team out onto the hallowed Wembley turf for that final, but it was goals from Ella Toone and Chloe Kelly that ensured the beautiful game could return to its spiritual base. Including extra time, the game lasted for just 110 nail-biting minutes against the old enemy, but the impact and, we hope, legacy of their victory will continue for far longer.

Firstly, there's the fact that it all just felt a bit nicer than the Euro 2020 final of the previous year. There were no fireworks being shoved up bottoms in Leicester Square, no mass violence on Wembley's Olympic Way and, thankfully, no vile racist abuse directed at players who had given their all. Instead, it felt like an inclusive, all-welcoming celebration that gave women's football in the UK its long overdue moment in the sun. Now, it's up to the powers that be to build on that success and ensure that the women's game has a bright future.

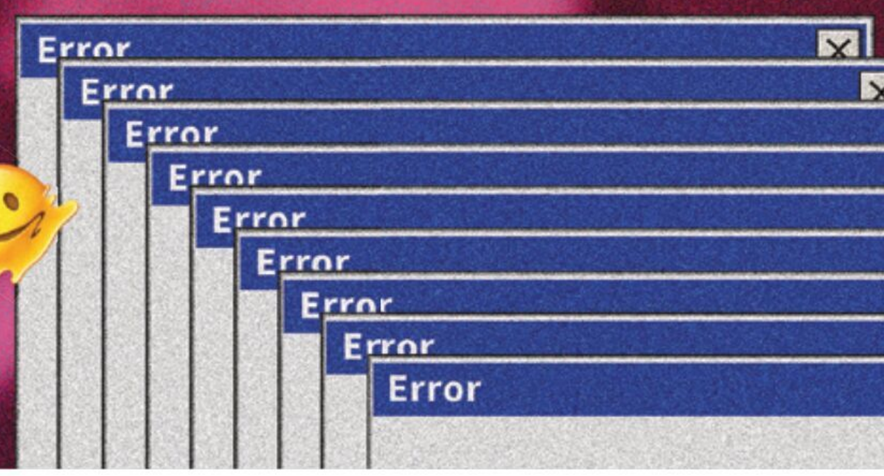
A new FA initiative called Inspiring Positive Change is at least offering promising signs. It is looking to boost attendances and, at a grassroots level, aiming for every primary school to offer equal access for boys and girls to play football, and for the sport to be played at all single-sex schools by September 2023. Speaking at the recent Labour Conference, Gary Neville suggested that the astronomical money in the men's game could be used to put the women's on a more level footing. "My mum was stopped from playing in the 70s for a school team and my brother was the manager of the England women's team for four years. My sister has fought for equal funding through Sport England for netball for many, many years. How can we be in 2022 still fighting for funding for equal pay, for equal investment into women's sport?"

Here's hoping that the triumphant roar of the Lionesses has provided the wake-up call that the game needs.



THE YEAR THAT NOTHING IN

BY SELIM BULUT



This year, I realised I needed to learn how to drive. I'd been made redundant during the pandemic, and a few months later was forced to leave my rental accommodation when my landlord decided to sell the house. By the time I found another job, I had left London and moved in with family. The new office was not too far from where I was living, but there was a small problem with commuting there. By train, it would be a two-and-a-half-hour journey each way, and a day return ticket would cost me £65. By car, it was only a 50-minute drive. The solution seemed obvious.

But what should have been a straightforward process of calling an instructor or driving school, finding somebody who could fit me into their schedule, and starting lessons a couple of weeks later, ended up being a tedious, months-long process. Every instructor I called was booked up, thanks to the huge backlogs caused by Covid.

In the meantime, I took my theory test and kept looking around. I had some luck when one company told me they could fit me in after a four-week wait, which was significantly shorter than the three or four months I was being told elsewhere. But when I finally had my first lesson, my instructor seemed confused. Why had I booked an intensive course, when it would be months before I could actually take my test?

It turns out that practical driving test centres around the country were also booked up. I figured this was also due to the post-pandemic backlog, but this didn't add up — how were so many tests being booked, considering there were so few available instructors? Looking into it, I found article after article talking about the real issue. Unscrupulous actors, never ones to miss an opportunity for profit, were exploiting people's desperation to get their licences and using AI to block-book test slots on the DVSA website. They then resold these back to learners for up to £200 a pop.

What was to be done about all this? Apparently, not much. The DVSA claimed they'd blocked tens of thousands of bot accounts, yet whenever I looked on their website, I was met with the same message: "no tests found on any date", for every test centre, for months ahead, for miles around.

Throughout 2022, it felt as if the UK was slowly, gradually, falling apart. I don't mean this in the sense that we were living in the 'Broken Britain' described by the tabloids in the mid-00s, where the country had somehow become stricken with some sort of moral affliction. I mean that things were quite literally not working as they were supposed to. Systems and institutions seemed to be gradually breaking down, people's lives were getting demonstrably worse as a result, and

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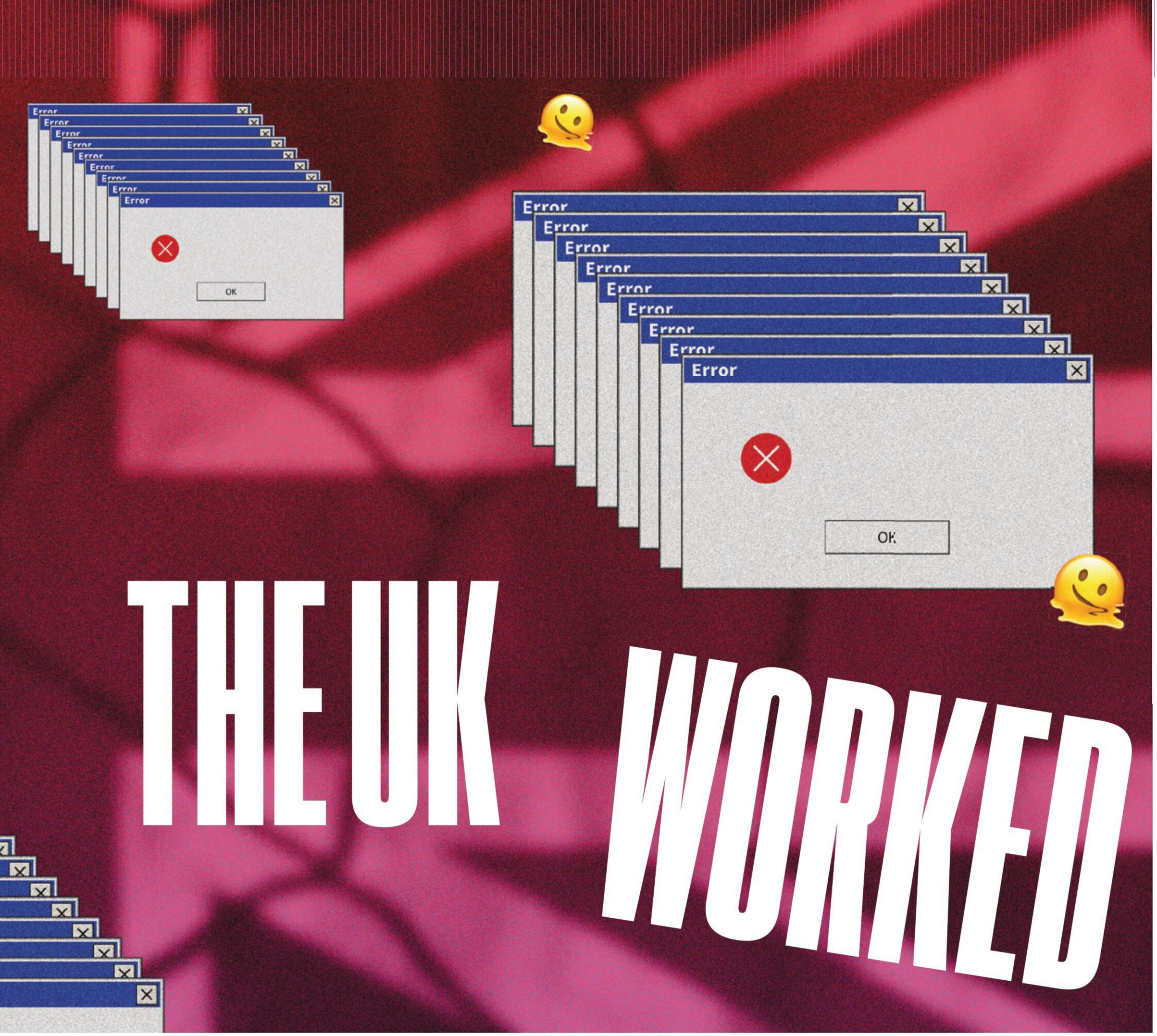


scammers and black marketeers were the only option available for the needy and the desperate. Our elected officials appeared to have little inclination to even acknowledge the problems, let alone fix them.

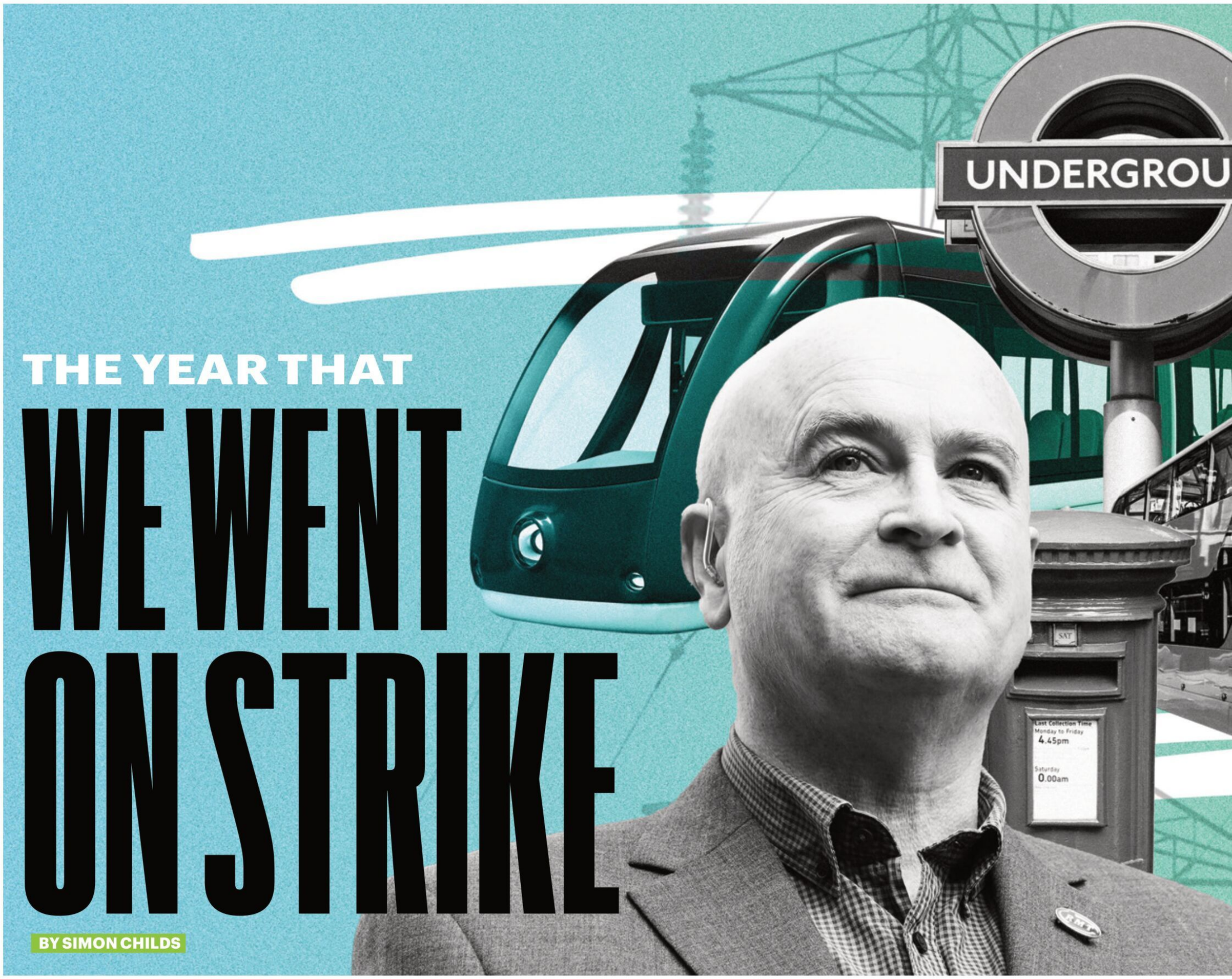
My own driving saga was one small, frustrating, but ultimately fairly benign example of this — others have had similar problems, like waiting months for their passport to be renewed when it used to take weeks. More sinister were reports of ambulances taking more than 12 hours to arrive, or sometimes not arriving at all. Or the rise of DIY dentistry, with people resorting to pulling out their own teeth or self-administering treatment without proper anaesthetic or professional training, because NHS dentists were turning patients away. Or food banks talking about demand outpacing supply, or councils begging for public venues that could be used for people to sit and simply be warm in a winter of soaring energy bills.

Politicians and the media were once able to ignore problems like these, as they only affected the poor and the desperate. But what will happen when even the middle class and well off are affected? Problems once dismissed as endemic to London's metropolitan elites were now being exported around the country. Housing supply simply isn't matching demand, and rents are sky-high as a result, with prospective tenants forced to outbid one another for the chance to live in a small, squalid bedroom. Elsewhere, wealthy towns in the south of England are seeing water companies dump raw sewage into their seas, rivers, and waterways, while the Environmental Agency shrug their shoulders, totally defanged and powerless to stop it.

In films, this sort of societal breakdown is usually rendered in the spectacle of apocalypse and riots. But the reality is more banal. Institutions are steadily underfunded and hollowed out, left to either hobble on in diminished form, or to eventually collapse in on themselves entirely. Apparently, this is just how things are, though. Who are you to think it should be otherwise?

From about 2016 onwards, people have remarked that they've lived through a "bad year". The rot set in much sooner, of course, but it was the EU referendum (followed by the election of Donald Trump, the quick succession of prime ministers, the pandemic, the protests, the wars, the refugees, the heatwaves, the droughts, and so on) that caused a large enough portion of the population to take notice. But after six "bad years" in a row, it seems more obvious that these aren't aberrations, but that we're caught in a downward spiral of collapse, callousness and corruption. If we want to get out of it, first we need to accept that change for the better is possible, so long as we only give power to people if they're going to do something about it.

Right now, though, I'm still just trying to book a driving test.



THE YEAR THAT

WE WENT ON STRIKE

BY SIMON CHILDS

While the French strike at the drop of a chapeau and love to kick aristocratic heads up and down the Champs-Élysées, the English drink cups of tea and get on with things, or so the stereotypes go. Although this image can be called into question with historical insurrections — the diggers, the Levellers, the miners' strike and so on — there's a definite sense that for the past few decades we have been a nation of subs who love to be dommed by our plutocratic political class.

2022 is surely the year that put a serious dent in this narrative. A once-in-a-lifetime assault on living standards has finally stirred the British public's inner rebelliousness.

As railway workers took strike action in July, a BBC news crew took to the stations presumably expecting to hear from passengers fuming at missing their trains, a classic vox-pop trope. Instead, they found that people were overwhelmingly supportive. The general sense that the strike was being supported was upheld by the data. A poll taken on 28 June found that 45 per cent of people supported strike action, compared to 37 per cent who opposed it. The week before, polling had shown that the numbers were a mirror image — only 37 per cent were supportive while 45 per cent opposed. Britain's privatised railways are to commuters what fleas are to a dog, which probably helped the workers in the PR war against their bosses. But the obvious fact is that there was a good deal of sympathy for strikers because members of the public feeling the financial pinch could easily relate to people taking action over falling wages.

"THE WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS MAN"

The media hadn't got the memo, though. RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch became a household name as he took to the airwaves and journalists used a playbook that completely jarred with the zeitgeist — that of the evil union "baron" using his members as pawns in a deranged and unnecessary

ISTOCK, ALAMY

show of militancy. Piers Morgan memorably pointed out that Lynch's Facebook profile picture is of The Hood from *Thunderbirds* — "the world's most dangerous man", who, with his bald pate and bushy eyebrows bears a vague resemblance to the union leader. All it seemed to prove was Morgan's increasing irrelevance and that Lynch has a sense of humour.

But it wasn't just Lynch and the RMT. As energy bills sky-rocketed and companies made record profits, polling showed that a majority of people were in favour of non-payment, prompted by the Don't Pay UK campaign. This was despite a *Daily Mail* hatchet job headlined, 'Don't Pay UK is organised by middle-class Corbynista rabble determined to "break the system."' Strikes don't always need public sympathy to win. A strike is simply a collective withdrawal of labour in order to exert power in the workplace. The RMT is one of the UK's most powerful unions because its members can literally stop the trains if you try to fuck with their retirement plan, *not* because everyone likes them for it.

Perhaps public support for strikers gives us an idea of just how bad things have got, rather than indicating a deep change in the public psyche. Nevertheless, British people having their train journeys cancelled by a mob of angry workers and responding with a collective "fair enough" — that surely counts as a major vibe shift. ®

WOMEN AGED INTO POP PUNK

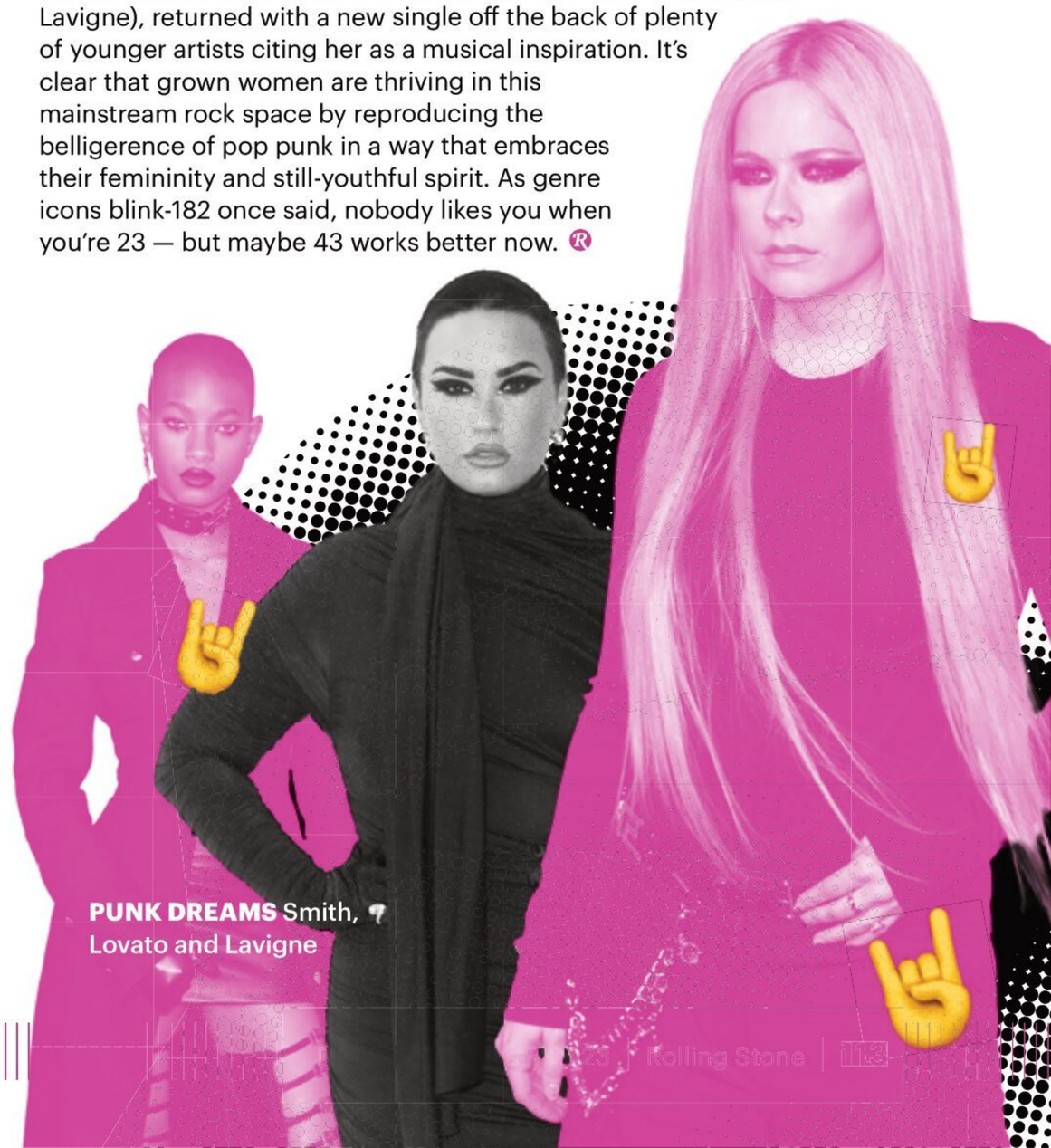
BY HANNAH EWENS

We're now nearly three years into the pop punk revival. During the pandemic, young people discovered the genre's 90s and 00s hits on TikTok as they engaged in nostalgia for something they never lived through: the unselfconscious early internet world of the generation above them. What could be more fitting for the conditions we all found ourselves in than a stroppy and exhilarating sub-genre of rock, whose teenage concerns rarely extend outside thwarted crushes, claustrophobic hometowns and being in the proverbial jail of a parents' house? But this era would be different. The once white-male-dominated space of pop punk saw the arrival of new artists and bands fronted by girls and people of colour — the likes of Willow Smith, Meet Me @ The Altar and pop sensation Olivia Rodrigo.

What was different about 2022 specifically was that adult women aged into pop punk. After decades of men in their 30s, 40s and 50s playing in bands like Green Day and blink-182 and continuing to have successful pop punk careers, releasing new music and doing legacy tours of their songs whining about women and how hard life is, Avril Lavigne answered the question: what if *women* grew up and still made this music? On *Love Sux* she successfully made the best pop punk album of the revival so far, receiving a five-star review from Rolling Stone, while leaning away from the pop rock she's known for and hard into the adolescent sound du jour.

Approaching 40 and wearing Converse, tutus, and red and black, Lavigne showed that women don't have to be too old for pop punk, either. Her off-kilter childlike energy lends itself well to this slight reinvention. From the accidentally amusing "*Forever and ever you're gonna wish I was your wifey*" to the bratty "*When I think of you, I just wanna throw up*", this is a lyrical exercise in showing that boys (now men but boys in spirit and name) are useless and dispensable.

More recently, 30-year-old Demi Lovato closed out the summer with critically favoured rock album, *HOLY FVCK*, featuring pop punk tracks like 'Substance', 'City of Angels' and 'Dead Friends' about addiction, lost loved ones, and consummating public spaces in Los Angeles. In addition, 37-year-old pop punk sensation Fefe Dobson, whose career was hampered back in the 00s by the rise of a similar artist (Avril Lavigne), returned with a new single off the back of plenty of younger artists citing her as a musical inspiration. It's clear that grown women are thriving in this mainstream rock space by reproducing the belligerence of pop punk in a way that embraces their femininity and still-youthful spirit. As genre icons blink-182 once said, nobody likes you when you're 23 — but maybe 43 works better now. ®



PUNK DREAMS Smith, Lovato and Lavigne

THE YEAR THAT

THE QUEEN DIED

BY STAN CROSS

Following the death of Queen Elizabeth II, the UK entered an official 10-day period of mourning. One journalist – a staunch republican – recounts what he saw

The Queen is dead, and you are crying. Your misty-eyed reaction may have been one you long anticipated, or it may have taken you quite by surprise, but whoever you are, and whatever your reasons, you know some aspect of the Queen's death moved you far enough beyond mere sadness that you shed actual tears. And you were, according to a YouGov poll, just one person among 44 per cent of Britons (which, in theory, encompasses 29.6 million people) who cried.

You are not like me. I was among the 54 per cent whose eyes were left dry and heart intact after the Queen's passing (the remaining 2 per cent were apparently so head-spun by proceedings that their minds stopped recording their emotional reaction altogether and left them only able to respond to YouGov's grief audit with "don't know"). That isn't to say the majority of the country harbours anything resembling the kind of republican sentiments that I do. In fact, in the 11 days between her dying and her funeral, further polling found that Queen Elizabeth II's death has resulted in a tremendous boon for the net popularity of the royals. If these trends continue, by my calculations, we are approximately four more monarch deaths away from statements like "the UK should continue to have

ISTOCK

a monarchy", "the royal family is good value for money" and "I'm proud of the monarchy" becoming unanimously agreed upon, incontrovertible truths on these fair shores.

I'd always known that Queen Elizabeth II was *personally* popular, particularly among those of a certain vintage. But I'd considered the wider royal family to be possessed of a soft and waning popularity, and that any fondness directed their way arose out of a sort of Stockholm Syndrome collective coping mechanism at having to learn to live with them as a background facet of our lives for so long, the way you might with a birthmark or a cracked phone screen. Even if they liked Lizzie herself, didn't most people agree with me on the basic premise that the divine right of kings and queens is an absurd and antiquated thing that should be abandoned to history?

Turns out: no. There is a disorientating gap between the way I experience life in Britain compared with so many of my apparent compatriots.

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The Queen is dead and I am in the pub. It's been 30 minutes since the news was announced. It is fresh, emotions should be raw, and yet there are no overt displays of monarchism to be found here. The mood among my fellow patrons is one of shared revelry to be living through one of the most inarguable "Where were you when...?" moments in history. Nobody has slammed a petulant fist into the bar, thrown a pint glass across the room, or upbraided us all for failing to put on our proper suits, do up our ties, and sing the national anthem. In truth, I'm slightly disappointed. I'd thought there'd be a palpable tension between ardent monarchists and exuberant republicans. Without that frisson, this occasion feels robbed of a certain anecdotal potential.

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The Queen is dead and you are outside Buckingham Palace. You got there early. A few hours ago, Huw Edwards changed into his mourning attire, and it became clear that Her Maj was being ushered into the shadow realm. The moment her death was announced, you and the congregation of Britain's most efficient mourners burst into a rendition of 'God Save the King'. The drab, droning nature of the song robs the moment of any poignancy, rendering it comic and vaguely embarrassing. Over the years, there have been many half-hearted attempts to change the national anthem to something more emotive, rousing, tear-jerking, something that isn't in a bizarrely difficult-to-sing 3/4 time signature and which maybe even contains the faintest whiff of a melody. 'Jerusalem', perhaps, or 'Land of Hope and Glory'. But inevitably all of the mooted alternatives will fail, for none can rival the lyrical content of 'God Save the King' for its obsequious belief that anything beyond the crown is irrelevant.

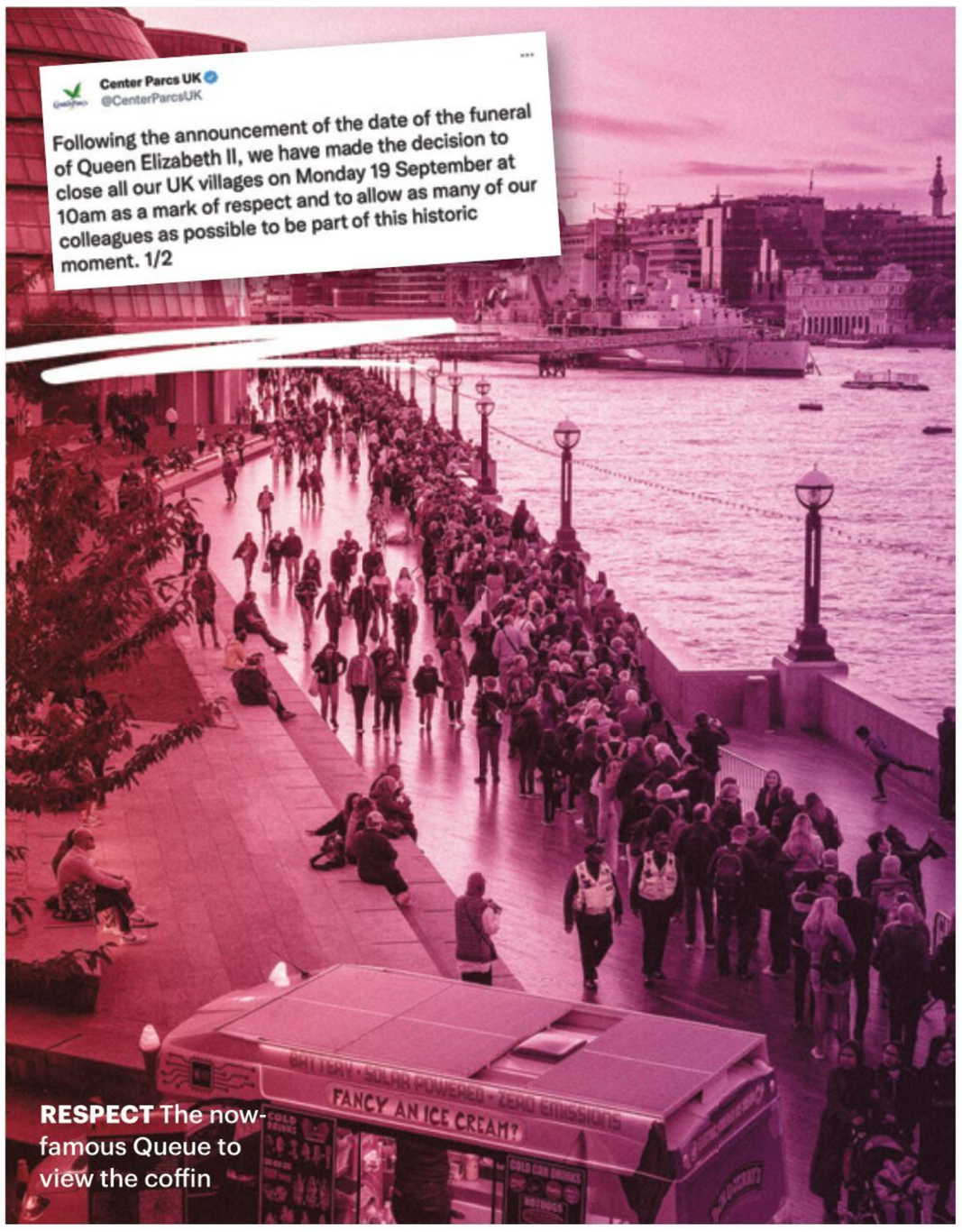
***

The Queen is dead and I'm outside Buckingham Palace with hundreds of others. It's been a few days since she died now. I'd wanted to witness the mass hysteria that had long been predicted when this moment came to pass, the kind that supposedly gripped the nation after the death of Princess Diana. There's none of that here: no one breaking out into inconsolable sobbing, no one holding a lighter aloft and belting out 'Candle in the Wind' 1997, no one violently shaking the gates, throwing their head back and bellowing *"WHY???"* at the heavens. It was all quite restrained; pleasant, even. Strangers milling about convivially, families laughing between themselves, mourners throwing thumbs-ups and beaming for selfies. It certainly wasn't a solemn or funereal atmosphere.

The general cheer and hubbub makes the whole affair feel more like something you might clock in the What's On? pages. Something to pop along to so you could say you'd been, like a Secret Cinema event. I try to pause in front of the whole scene, to drink in some feeling of historicity at being *here* in the aftermath of *this*, but am quickly hectored by a steward to "keep it moving along, folks," until I end up in the adjacent Green Park, home to the official public shrine.

I'd hoped to see at least a few bizarre and eerie tokens left by grief-addled strangers, but either the stewards were methodical about removing them, or people simply hadn't taken leave of their senses enough to have laid down a selection of their favourite ElfBars or a full casserole dish of lasagne for Queenie. Instead, it was a sea of flower bouquets and cards, occasionally interspersed with Paddington Bears and marmalade sandwiches in zip-locked bags (in defiance of signage specifically asking people not to leave anything other than flowers and cards there). Some of these offerings had been neatly arranged into makeshift mazes or giant letters spelling out 'Elizabeth', but a lot of it had been left to pile up in great big mounds, bursting at the seams.

I ask one of the stewards what will happen to everything once the mourning period is over. He tells me that the majority of it will be composted. And the Paddingtons? He shrugs. "Probably chuck 'em,



RESPECT The now-famous Queue to view the coffin

ALAMY

"THE GENERAL CHEER AND HUBBUB MAKES THE WHOLE AFFAIR FEEL MORE LIKE SOMETHING YOU MIGHT CLOCK ON THE WHAT'S ON? PAGES"

to be honest." This is the closest the occasion has come to moving me. It's fairly apparent that a lot of the tributes have been left by very young children, or at the very least, took time and care to source and compose. A lot of it has already been completely buried among the other detritus, where it will remain until discarded. I imagine a five-year-old being told that the card they spent hours lovingly crafting has been hoofed into a landfill along with their favourite Paddington toy they attached it to.

I'm snapped out of this as my thoughts return to the death of Diana, the earliest news event I have any memory of. This recollection isn't vivid, and almost all of the key scenes and details are missing, including how I myself reacted to them. I can only recall a dim awareness of it all happening. I was five and it seems entirely probable that my primary school had us compose cards in her honour, too. I can't imagine I was particularly cut up or even sad about the whole thing, and if I was, it would've been because I'd been told to be. If I did make that card, nobody saved it.

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The Queen is dead and battle stations have been called. You are an account manager at a PR agency representing a number of Big Brands, and this is your industry's Chernobyl. Your clients' futures are in your hands and one wrong move could spell devastation, yet the situation demands an immediate response, for some reason. What is the appropriate thing for Dr Oetker to say at a time like this? Should Compare the Meerkat's Aleksandr Orlov break character, or deliver his condolences in the client's approved tone of voice? How can Oddbins tap into the conversation around the Queen's death and connect with key demographics? Get someone to monochrome all the logos, ASAP — the Dolmio man is currently offering up a bowl of distastefully vibrant ragu, and Lloyd Grossman has already lowered his glasses to half-mast. Stop all the scheduled tweets. Cut off the E.ON customer helplines. Prevent the George Foreman social team from going live with their 'Grilling Machines for Flame Loving Queens' campaign.

Unfortunately, your undoubtedly sincere efforts to balm the nation's ailing hearts are met with widespread ridicule and derision. People just don't seem to think that a jpeg of white text on a black background, extending the thoughts of everyone at Ann Summers or Shrek's Adventure! London to the Royal Family, are particularly necessary, nor warranted. Some even view the touching tributes as wilfully cynical attempts to marketeer off an elderly woman's death.

But is the Queen, who lends her image to our literal money, really so sullied by association with commerce? Defenders of the monarchy often argue that the royal family are a great advert for UK tourism. By this logic, when Colonel Sanders and Ronald McDonald extend their branded condolences to the Queen, is it really a marketing ploy, or are they just recognising a fallen comrade? When Jim Henson died, Disney sent a doodle of Mickey Mouse comforting a distraught Kermit the Frog — is what these brands are doing so different?

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The Queen is dead and everything is cancelled. The weekend's football is cancelled. Up-to-date weather reporting is cancelled. NFT sale Bowie on the Blockchain is cancelled. The planned industrial strikes are cancelled. Corwen in Denbighshire's day commemorating Owain Glyndŵr, who sought to emancipate Wales from the British Crown? Cancelled. Good news, however, if you wanted to go and view the monument to William Wallace

TRIBUTE Flowers and Paddington Bears were left for the Queen

"WE'RE WATCHING PEOPLE OSTENSIBLY GRIEVE AS A SPECTACLE. WE CAN'T SEE THE QUEEN. SHE'S VIRTUALLY ABSENT FROM THE WHOLE THING"

— the infamous warrior for Scottish independence, hung, drawn and quartered by (again) the British Crown — in Ayr; that remained open, and lit up in the colours of the Union Jack.

None of these cancellations seemed to be responding to a clamour from the public to do so. There are no baying mobs roaming the streets, patrolling for instances of non-grieving-related activity to snuff out, or Center Parcs holidaymakers sneaking out of their lodges to execute. I get the gnawing suspicion that the cancellations and closures are driven by fear of something else — the possibility of being plastered across the front pages of the right-wing press, under headlines like 'FOR SHAME: the Village That Street-partied While Queen Lay in State', or 'GRATUITOUS: the Local Art Gallery Willing to Exhibit Anything, Except Respect'. It seems healthy that we have to accept that a large section of our news media operates as a national ducking stool, a phantom whose threat disciplines us into modulating our public behaviour and responses, lest we suffer its wrath.

***

The Queen is dead and I'm trying to find the end of The Queue. The line for the hoi polloi to be able to pay respects to her body at Westminster Hall opened the afternoon before, and already stretches three miles, taking a rumoured nine hours to complete (later, those figures will reach '10 hours' and 'over 24 hours' respectively). The phenomenon has gripped the public imagination. I want to ask those at the back what's possessing them to join, given the extraordinary length and ensuing discomfort involved. I also suspect the people at the front are sick of being interviewed by now. The mood at the tail end is optimistically cavalier, the way I remember being at the beginning of school trips, before the reality of having to spend 15 hours on a coach with only a DVD of *Lee Evans: Live at Wembley* to keep us occupied really sank in. Everyone is buoyantly passing around Percy Pigs and clutching Thermos flasks, as yet untroubled by their bladders.

The first person I speak to is a journalist who has joined The Queue for a feature. After striking up conversation with someone else and discovering that they, too, are a journalist, I begin to grow suspicious that The Queue might be entirely comprised of journalists, and the whole thing is an elaborate ouroboros scam to generate commissions. The next dozen or so people aren't blue-ticked, but provide the same anthropological justifications for being here that I am. They can't miss *this*, the downright weird phenomenon of The Queue itself. They saw the coverage and had to be a part of it.

Britons love these Dave Gorman-esque acts of extreme twee endurance: visiting every Wetherspoons in the British Isles, unicycling from Land's End to John O'Groats, spending a week in a bathtub of baked beans for Comic Relief, queueing for an entire day to be permitted a five-second window to nod at a box allegedly containing the Queen. Why? To simply say

ISTOCK

you've done it, and to be able to recount their observations to their respective audiences later, be they *Daily Telegraph* readers, group chats, or dinner party guests. The fact that the ends cannot possibly justify the ridiculous means is all part of the allure for middle-class Brits who take perverse pride in it.

Numerous news outlets broadcast continuous, unbroken live footage of The Queue, both as internet streams, and just in place of their television coverage. It takes on an ambient quality, particularly when viewed in the wee hours, surreal and yet completely banal. It seems fitting that The Queue is officially presided over by the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport. We're watching people ostensibly grieve as a spectacle. We can't see the Queen. She's virtually absent from the whole thing.

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The Queen is dead and I am drinking a pint of what tastes like pure line cleaner. A friend has insisted we meet at a Millwall *and* Rangers pub, which happens to sit near the mouth of The (now 10-miles-and-24-hours-plus-long) Queue. If the ardent royalists are to be found anywhere, surely they will be here. But either they're all in The Queue, or they've also been put off by whatever substance they're claiming comes out of the beer taps. The pub is mostly dead, save for a gaggle of tourists and a woman in full Royal Navy Officer's uniform, replete with a couple of medals.

Television screens normally dedicated to the Super Sunday blare out the coverage from inside The Queue. It turns out we've arrived just in time to witness the Vigil of the Princes, where various members of the immediate Windsor family "stand guard" around Her Maj's box. The naval officer spots something and incredulously exclaims, "They've put *Andrew* in *uniform*?!" She walks directly out of the pub, leaving a half pint.

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The Queen is dead and I am at her funeral. I'm standing on a packed stretch of pavement, next to a road her hearse will travel down, transporting her body on its final journey between Westminster Abbey and Windsor Castle, where it will be committed.

We are all here hours before the procession will go past, in order to get a spot. This means we have nothing to do in the interim, save to look eagerly at a completely empty road in anticipation, or else stream the funeral service on our phones. Basically, everyone chooses the latter, Bluetooth headphones in, blinkers on, atmosphere at a minimum.

The first service draws to a close, and they begin marching the Queen's coffin down the Mall on foot. This takes ages, until they reach a point where they put the coffin in a hearse and it begins making its way towards us. People are fully focused on the empty stretch of road now. One guy keeps an earphone in and another eye on Google Maps, performing a valuable service for the rest of us by keeping us informed of the coffin's ETA: "15 minutes away now!... 10 minutes!... Only five now!... Two minutes!... Everyone! One minute!..." A sea of smartphones are raised in prepared salute, cameras open and pre-focused. "She's at the top of the road!" People begin to clap, politely and disjointedly.

Her flotilla drives solemnly past, not slowing down to allow her to lap up the applause, to drink in the adulation. We are permitted the shortest of windows to glimpse her and to bid our farewells. I use mine to get a snap of her hearse. It's only when reviewing the image that I notice something curious.

There's nothing in the back of the hearse. Turns out, I've actually taken a photo of the car following directly behind the one transporting her body. Now the Queen has driven off, bound for her final resting place, via the M4.

The Queen is dead, and I let the moment pass me by. ®

DRIVE-BY The Queen's coffin on its journey

STAN CROSS

‘I’d Drive That Tesla Down to the Factory. And I’d Burn It.’

Seven women are alleging abusive behaviour and suing Tesla — adding to a growing list of legal problems for Elon Musk-run companies

By Stephen Rodrick

Illustration by Mike McQuade

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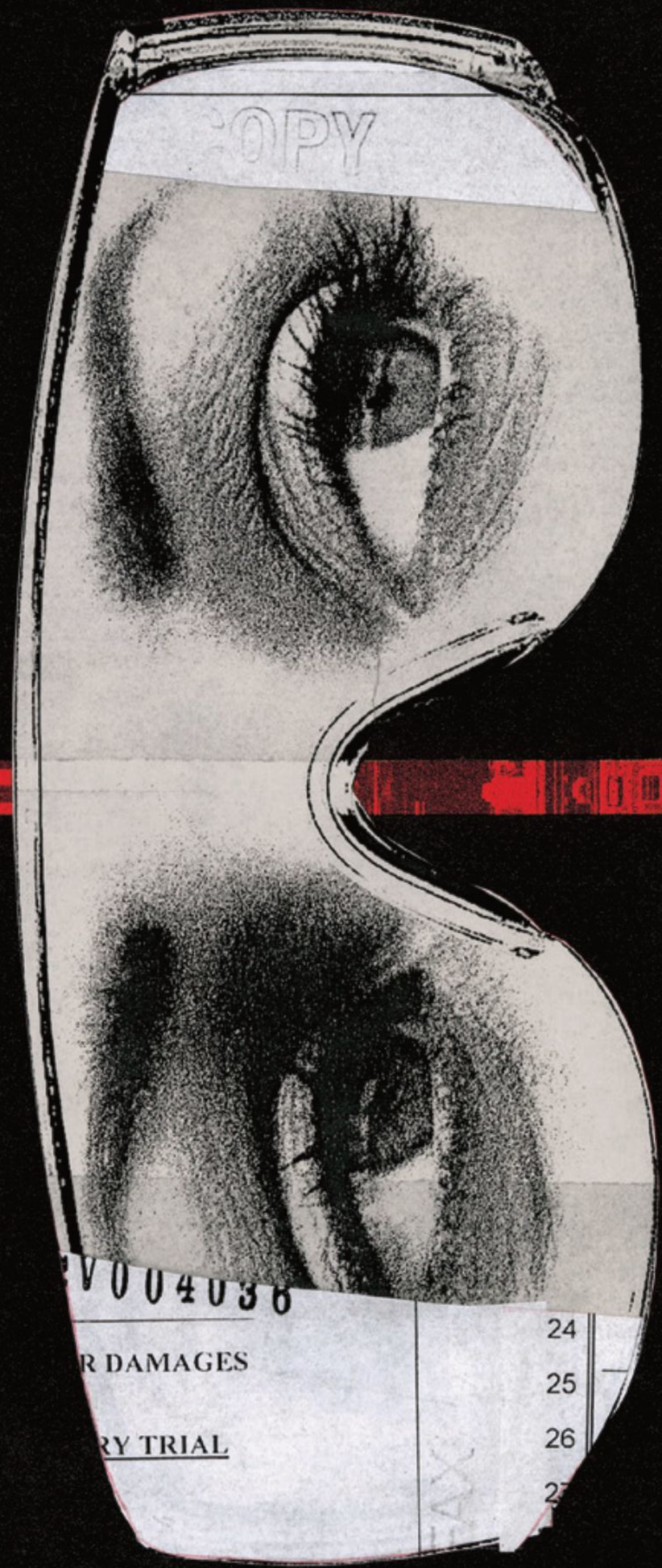


Corporate culture comes from the top in America.

At least that's the platonic ideal. How a company sets its global image, how it treats its employees, what it values – that all starts in the so-called C-suite. In some companies, that ethos can be found in a single man – they are almost always men – who emerges as the face of the firm. (Think Steve Jobs at Apple or Jeff Bezos at Amazon.) That *l'etat, c'est moi* approach is evident at Tesla. Elon Musk is Tesla, and Tesla is Elon Musk. This has been true since the South African became CEO and wrested control of the electric-car company from its founders in 2008. The board is not forcing Musk's hand. (It was Musk who decided Tesla would move its corporate HQ from California to Texas.) At times he can be so hands-on that he has overnighted at the Fremont, California, factory where the cars are manufactured. Musk's tweets can make Tesla stock rise and fall. The personal and the corporate are inseparable.

This is not in dispute.

This summer was a busy one for Musk. He decided to buy and then decided not to buy Twitter. Then, at the end of October, he bought it. He fathered children Number Nine and Number 10 with a female executive at another of his companies. His third child disowned him. (Simultaneously, Musk's father, Errol, admitted to having fathered a second child with his stepdaughter.) He denied concurrently that he broke up the marriage of the co-founder of Google and that he offered to buy a flight attendant a horse in exchange for an erotic massage.

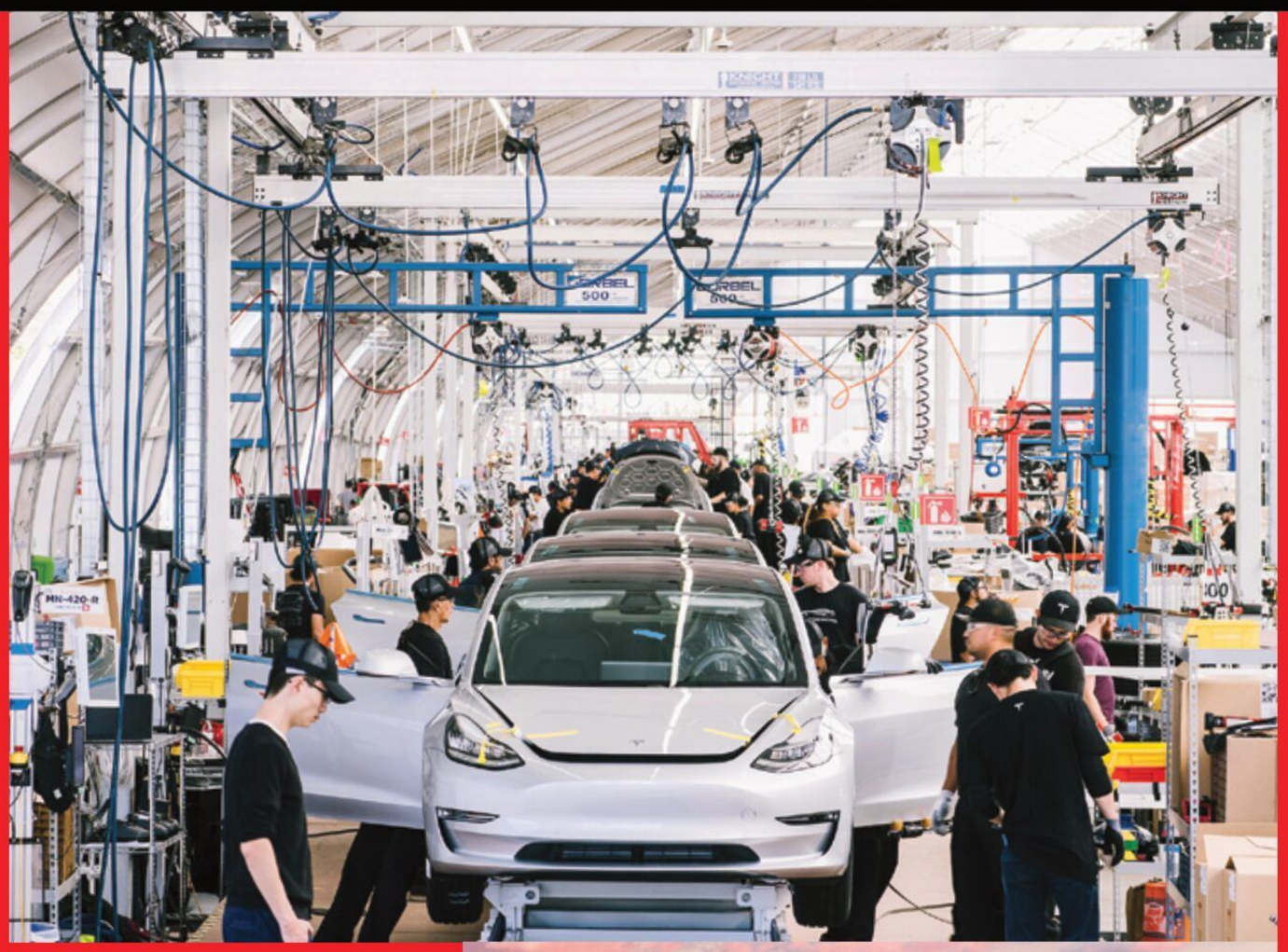
The flight attendant received a settlement that was billed to SpaceX, Musk's rocket company. It hasn't been a great year for women at SpaceX. In December, former SpaceX engineer Ashley Kosak published an essay meticulously detailing alleged sexual harassment at the company. That was followed in June by a group of SpaceX employees releasing a statement saying Musk's frattish behaviour was "a frequent source of distraction and embarrassment" and asking Musk to stop being, well, a creep. SpaceX investigated their complaints for 24 hours, and then announced that SpaceX had "terminated a number of employees involved".

On a not-unrelated note, Musk continued his longstanding love affair with "69" memes, often tweeting them to his 105 million Twitter followers. This is not an accident. Musk has made geek loucheness his personal brand and a component of Tesla's marketing strategy. It may have even helped to save his company. By 2016, Tesla had released two models, the S and the X; both were critically acclaimed and massive hits for the previously tiny electric-vehicle market, but not enough to keep a giant company afloat. The next car would make or break Tesla. After building a roadster and an SUV, Tesla's third car was going to be a sensible sedan, but Musk had to make it edgy. His plan was to name the crossover version the Model Y and the sedan the Model E, completing his "S-E-X-Y" line of cars that he had hinted at in tweets and speeches for years.

Alas, Ford, the historical home of the Model T, rumbled about trademark infringement and possible litigation. So Musk changed the car's name to the Model 3. The company began selling T-shirts and coffee cups with a logo reading S3XY. Get it? (It wasn't just about the cars' torque and acceleration.) Wordsmiths groaned but Musk loved it. "We just trademarked 'sexy'," boasted Musk in an interview.

With increased public demand for EVs and backed by the S3XY campaign, the Model 3 was a megahit. Since the car was released in July 2017, Tesla has sold three million 3s, and the company's stock has risen from $62 at the beginning of 2018 to a high of more than $1,200 a share on 1 November 2021. The 3 is the bestselling electric vehicle in the world and is as omnipresent in America's affluent neighbourhoods as lacrosse sticks.

Musk became the richest man in the world and continued his frat-boy-as-businessman



THE FREMONT FACTORY More than half of the Teslas in the world are made at Fremont (top and above right). The S3XY marketing campaign for the Model 3 included the sale of red satin short-shorts. One of the women suing alleges that at her induction a man in a S3XY shirt welcomed new employees

strategy. He announced in July 2020 the sale of a limited number of red satin short-shorts with the word S3XY written across the ass, ostensibly tweaking Tesla short sellers who lost billions as the stock rose. "Only $69.420," tweeted Musk. (He is also big into weed memes.) They sold out in minutes.

Alisa Blickman didn't know any of this in 2021 – she just needed work. She had been laid off from her job in Oakland as the pandemic crushed the Bay Area's economy. What Blickman did know was that she was the sole provider for her child and Tesla was offering $21 an hour, with the promise of overtime.

Blickman applied online last autumn and was quickly hired. A few days later, she made the 50-mile drive from her Pittsburg apartment to a Marriott near the Fremont plant for orientation. She alleges that the sketchy vibe began the moment she walked into a conference room. A man in a S3XY T-shirt welcomed her and the other new hires. The man soon began talking about the company, telling the new employees that "Teslas are so sexy" and "These are some sexy cars."

Blickman wasn't a Tesla fangirl, so she didn't understand why there was so much talk of sexy at an induction session for a global corporation.

"I just thought it was very weird," Blickman tells me. We are sitting in the deserted pool area of her apartment complex. It's June, but she's in a puffer jacket and occasionally shivers. I wonder whether it was because of the morning chill or talking about her experiences working at Tesla.

A year after being hired, Blickman is one of seven former Tesla workers who have filed sexual-harassment lawsuits against Musk's car company in the past 10 months. The women, most of whom were let go, allege a level of sexual harassment that paints Tesla as more like one of William Blake's "dark satanic mills" than a high-flying Silicon Valley corporation saving the environment.

The following story is based on court documents, including those filed on behalf of the women, and Tesla's filings in these cases, as well as interviews with five of the women, their friends, and co-workers. In their lawsuits and their interviews, the women describe a workplace rife with sexual harassment and a culture of indifference or hostility to their concerns and complaints.

Tesla, which has not had an active public-relations department since 2020, does not typically reply to press enquiries, and did not respond to multiple requests for comment for this story. In its court filings in the women's cases, Tesla invoked the arbitration clause in its employment agreement and has denied the women's claims. "Tesla has always and continues to strictly prohibit its employees from engaging in any form of sexual harassment," Tesla asserts in filings in one of the cases. The company emphasises that it works to ensure "a safe and respectful work environment", backing this up with multiple declarations by employees in various roles. And it cites its anti-harassment training and "See Something Say Something" and "Take Charge" programmes that "empower employees to report any issues," and claims it "promptly and thoroughly investigates ... sexual harassment and, if substantiated ... takes appropriate disciplinary measures, up to and including termination". When reached by phone, the company's lead lawyer, Sara A. Begley of Holland & Knight, acknowledged that she had received Rolling Stone's enquiries, and then offered a terse "No comment."

Tesla didn't answer questions about Musk's sexually charged public persona and how it might trickle down in potentially damaging and unforeseen ways.

In Blickman's case, she claims, problems started at her onboarding session. She recalls the man in the S3XY T-shirt starting to read in a monotone about Tesla's various policies. Eventually, he came to the company's policy on sexual harassment. According to Blickman, he played an instructional video. Many of the examples in the video were of women harassing men. She couldn't believe it.

"I thought, 'If I'm sexually harassed, they're not going to care,'" Blickman says.

On her first day at work, Blickman alleges she watched a male Tesla worker take photos of a woman's backside as other men watched quietly, as if the man was hunting big game. The photos were soon circulating around the factory. On a break, Blickman says, she went up to the woman and asked if she was OK. The woman just shrugged.

"I'm used to it," Blickman says the woman told her. "Shit like that happens all the time here."

At first, Blickman says, she kept her mouth shut. Almost every day, she alleges, she heard the male workers in the factory sizing up women: "Oh, I'd do her." "I'd fuck her." "Her ass is a 10." She had spent many years working in a predominantly male world as a delivery driver, and knew how to manoeuvre around a bad seed or two. The problem at Tesla, she says, was there were too many bad seeds.

PREVIOUS PAGE: IMAGES IN ILLUSTRATION BY WIREIMAGE; GETTY IMAGES, 3; "THE WASHINGTON POST"/GETTY IMAGES. THIS PAGE, FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: JUSTIN KANEPS/"THE NEW YORK TIMES"/REDUX; TESLA.COM; NOAH BERGER/AP IMAGES

A few weeks into her time at Tesla, she alleges, a male worker inched into her workspace and began intentionally touching her with his arm and then his leg. The man walked up to Blickman on a break and smiled. "You're a pretty little white girl."

She also alleges the man lied and told her he was a "lead", a.k.a. a supervisor, which dissuaded her from complaining about him. On another occasion, she says, she told the man to back off. She claims the man told a couple of co-workers that he wanted to kill her and another employee. Eventually, management moved him to a different part of the factory, but Blickman still had to see him on a regular basis.

Blickman tried to focus on her work, but says that she remained afraid.

"It's awkward, and I'm not an idiot," Blickman tells me. "I've just started, what's it going to look like if I say I'm being sexually harassed right away?"

Blickman began commuting with another worker, Jessica Brooks, one of the seven women who have filed suit against Tesla, who claims she eventually began piling boxes around her workstation so Tesla workers couldn't gawk at her body, and confirms Blickman's story. Brooks and Blickman talk about how all the catcalls and awful behaviour made them want to call in sick. Daily, they both allege, they heard men talk about female employees, debating which ones were fuckable. Blickman claims she heard one male worker shout about another woman employee.

"I'd like to bend her over and spread her cheeks."

Another man blurted out his sexual preferences: "I like to spit on a girl's face when I'm fucking her."

Blickman's first supervisor wouldn't help because, she alleges, he was one of the worst offenders. Each day, she claims, he approached Blickman from behind and gave her an unwanted massage on her lower back. Blickman just gritted her teeth under her Covid mask and waited for it to be over. (In another one of the women's lawsuits, Tesla filed a sworn statement from a female worker who allegedly worked close to Blickman and Brooks, saying she didn't hear or see any sexual harassment at the factory, and multiple other Tesla employees submitted declarations along the same lines, insisting that if they had, they would have reported it.)

Tesla requires its workers to do a few minutes of stretching every morning before their shift. One day, Blickman alleges, her supervisor came up behind her and whispered in her ear.

"I hear you don't like to scream loud enough."

Blickman says she broke for a moment and turned towards her supervisor.

"What?"

The man backed away and rephrased his statement, she claims.

"Uh, I hear you don't like to scream 'teamwork' loud enough."

Later, that supervisor was transferred to a different part of the factory. His parting gift? According to Blickman, he told his replacement that she was not "a valuable team member" and suggested she be exiled to a harder job outside in the "tents", one of the factory's least desirable areas to work.

Outside of work, Blickman says, she ran into a female Tesla worker. They talked a bit and Blickman confided to her that she was a lesbian. Blickman says the woman then aggressively came on to her, but Blickman told her she wasn't interested in going on a date. The woman grew angry, and Blickman alleges she outed her to the rest of her Tesla workers.

Blickman says this resulted in a new wave of harassment. The woman who outed her would, Blickman claims, get her attention by making thrusting motions. She says the woman followed her into the bathroom and dropped to the ground and looked under the stalls for her.

Blickman says Tesla's HR was less than useless. (From a statement issued by Tesla and from its filing in the women's cases, the company claims it later amped up some of its sexual-harassment training and processes.) Blickman says she did find one male worker who was sympathetic to her. He'd listen as she detailed her complaints. "He was definitely not a pig," remembers Blickman. "But he was only one in a sea of pigs. There were just too many in there."

The months passed and Blickman found it increasingly difficult to drag her body out of bed at 4.30 am to make the 90-minute commute to her 12-hour shift. She was drinking and smoking too much. Every break, she had an urge to bolt the factory. Blickman tells me that in the autumn of 2021, she asked to be transferred to one of Tesla's service centres. There was a problem with her paperwork – she doesn't know if this was done on purpose or was just incompetence.

In October, Blickman took Covid leave. She emailed Tesla HR while away and told them she needed to take stress leave. She detailed some of the harassment she claims that she and others had suffered. HR replied about meeting in person, but then, Blickman says, she didn't hear anything else, so she didn't go back to the factory. She was fired when she didn't return to work after getting a letter from Tesla in November saying that company policy might result in the termination of employees if they didn't come to work for two days in a row without notification.

After remaining stoic through most of our conversation, Blickman's eyes fill with tears: "I was just looking for a place where I can work and not be bothered, not be harassed. Is that too much to ask?"

I ask her if she thought Musk's slavish devotion to frat-boy humour contributed to Tesla workers saying whatever they wanted to women.

"Of course," she says. "There are people in that factory who see him as a god. If he talks like that, they know they can, too."

There is no evidence suggesting that Musk knew about the alleged harassment going on at Tesla's Fremont factory before the women filed their lawsuits. But for a guy who claims to be so hands-on, it's hard to imagine he wouldn't have picked up on complaints about the allegedly pervasive culture. And if he didn't know, why didn't he know?

THERE IS A COMMUNITY coming to life on the once desolate land adjacent to Tesla's Fremont factory. For years, the Warm Springs neighbourhood was a dreary industrial area that had become a haven for people dumping rubbish and junking cars while participating in other unsavoury activities. Now, there's a new

"There are people in that factory who see Elon Musk as a god," one of the women tells me. "If he talks like that, they know they can, too"

THE RICHEST MAN IN THE WORLD The women suing all say they are afraid of taking on a Musk-run company, but some of them also feel his louche personal life and brash persona helped enable some of the sexual harassment they allege happened at Tesla, and want to hold him accountable

primary school, the first one built in Fremont in 25 years. It's just a 15-minute walk on freshly laid pavements to a recently opened Bay Area Rapid Transit stop connecting the blue-collar town to San Francisco. The boulevards are wide, and the charging stations are plentiful. Townhouses at the corner of Innovation Way and Synergy Street are going for $1.4 million.

Currently, Fremont produces more than half of the Teslas in the world. The factory is on the grounds of a former General Motors plant that was bought by Tesla for $42 million in 2010. Just 12 years later, Fremont has become the most productive auto plant in the country, building almost 8,550 environmentally friendly electric cars a week in 2021. The numbers are trumpeted as further signs of Musk's genius.

However, Tesla isn't a stranger to litigation about its work culture. In 2021, a jury held the company liable in a racial-discrimination suit filed by a Black worker who alleged the use of the n-word was common at the factory and that racial slurs were scrawled on the walls. (Tesla disputed the judge's findings after the verdict and assured its employees that the facts didn't justify the jury's verdict.)

This spring, 15 Tesla workers filed a suit against the company alleging that Black workers were often greeted by white bosses with comments of "Welcome to the plantation." The suit also alleges that Black workers were given the most daunting physical assignments. "Race plays no role in any of Tesla's work assignments, promotions, pay, or discipline," lawyers for the company said in a statement. "Tesla prohibits discrimination, in any form."

This followed a February lawsuit filed by the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing against Tesla for racial discrimination and harassment at the Fremont plant. (In a statement, Tesla called the lawsuit "misguided" and denied the allegations, dubbing the proceedings "unfair and counterproductive, especially because the allegations focus on events from years ago.")

Tesla's defenders would argue that every large company will at times face lawsuits, HR challenges, and disgruntled employees. However, Tesla seems to be an extreme case both in the quantity of legal actions brought in quick succession and the consistent nature of the allegations. And most companies don't have a rule-defying leader like Musk, what with his tweets floating the idea for a new school whose acronym just happens to spell out TITS – "Am thinking of starting a new university: Texas Institute of Technology & Science... It will have epic merch."

The women's legal filings detailed alleged incidents ranging from being asked for hand jobs to being stalked by drunk-on-the-job employees in the car park. While the cases make their way through the system and Tesla pushes back against the allegations, the fallout has been catastrophic for the women. One couldn't leave her bedroom for weeks. Some feel ashamed, a common reaction among sexual-harassment victims. And many are having trouble jump-starting their careers after their time at Tesla left a black hole on their résumé. The women tell Rolling Stone they can't understand why the kind of behaviour they claim they experienced was, and possibly still is, being tolerated by Tesla and Musk. They believe Musk should be held accountable.

The never-modest Musk recently proclaimed that he would jack up Fremont's production by 50 per cent in the near future. That means more jobs. Musk is offering something to workers who could never buy a $60,000 entry-level Tesla, much less a million-dollar home: a $21-an-hour (approx. £18) wage. This is manna for blue-collar workers in America, where most of the factory jobs that used to support manual labour have been shipped overseas or down to Mexico. Men and women from economically distressed towns like Antioch, Stockton and Modesto talk excitedly about doubling their take-home pay. Yes, 90-minute commutes each way – exponentially longer if you are relying on public transportation – are a nightmare. And, yes, you are standing on your feet for 12-hour shifts in a non-union shop where you can be fired without cause. And, yes, there was a killing in the car park last December, when one worker allegedly laid in wait for another worker and gunned him down. Still, there is optimism in the air. Even the women bringing the lawsuits tell me they had been excited about working at a place with cool tech that was making our air a little better.

Then, they say, reality settles in.

ALIZE BROWN THOUGHT that if she covered her body head-to-toe in oversized clothing, she would be left alone.

It was November 2020 and most of the Bay Area economy was still on Covid shutdown. She was 21, had a three-month-old son, and her partner was out of work. Brown didn't hesitate when a recruitment agency offered her a job casting metal parts for Tesla. She tells Rolling Stone she had heard from a female cousin who had worked at Tesla that it was a tough place for a woman to work. Brown says she thought they were being dramatic.

According to Brown, she kissed her baby goodbye a few days later and left for work at 4.30 am. At 6 am, she clocked in and learned her station wasn't in the factory but outside in an area commonly known as the "tents", where she would be dunking metal parts into a hot chemical liquid to prepare them for shaping. She was given work gloves to protect her hands from the toxic liquids, but tells me she soon noticed other workers had burns on their forearms where the gloves ended. She was then required to "grind" the pieces into shape with a tool.

She says she also soon learned that there were other dangers. First there were catcalls from male workers. Her court filing detailed some of them:

"Are you single?"

"No, I have a partner and a baby."

Brown alleges the men would just laugh.

"Whatever man you're with doesn't care about you because you're working."

(Tesla filings include a sworn statement from one of Brown's supervisors claiming that he

CHRISTOPHE GATEAU/PICTURE ALLIANCE/GETTY IMAGES

DRIVING FORCE According to Tesla's official model assignment table, released in April, the Tesla Fremont Factory has an output of up to 600,000 cars per year (more than 1,640 per day, assuming 365 days), including 100,000 Model S/Model X and 500,000 Model 3 and Model Y

had not seen or heard any sexual harassment targeting Brown.)

Brown tells me that she informed her Tesla supervisor that she was breastfeeding and would need to pump during her 12-hour shift. She says that information spread throughout the department. This quickly became a subject of sport with her co-workers, particularly one male worker who became obsessed with her. He started making comments about her breastfeeding, often referring to her as a "cow", or saying that she was "milking". She says that when her breast milk leaked and stained her shirt, he would say things like, "I see you're milking today." According to her complaint, the man would spend most of the workday bothering Brown, following her around. And he was always talking, she claims.

"You're looking hella thick today."

Brown decided to do what she could to deter the unwanted attention. That's when she bought an extra-large mechanic's jumpsuit to envelop her body, and started wearing a wool hat to cover her hair and a big scarf for making her neck invisible. Other than her face, hardly an inch of her skin was exposed.

"I just wanted to blend in and somehow disappear," Brown tells me at a Starbucks not far from her apartment. She's wearing a jaunty straw hat and has an easy smile, but her fists keep clenching in anger. "I just wanted to do my job and go home. They wouldn't let me."

After a month or so, she says, she went to her male supervisor and complained about the creepy co-worker. "He is saying very inappropriate comments to me. I'm feeling uncomfortable. Can you say something to him?"

According to Brown's court filing, her supervisor, who she claims frequently looked her body up and down, brushed it off. (In a filing by the supervisor in another one of the cases, he claims none of the employees he supervised ever complained to him about other employees using harassing language, and that he would have escalated any such complaint to HR.)

Things somehow got worse. The Tesla factory is immense, with 10,000 employees. Besides lunch, workers receive two 15-minute breaks during their 12-hour shifts. Brown would have to walk quickly just to reach a toilet and get back in time. Brown alleges the co-worker followed her to the bathroom. She says she begged him to stop harassing her. He just laughed and went back to his crude talk. Brown alleges she went to her supervisor and asked him to move her to a different part of the factory, but, she claims, the man soon moved there, too, and continued harassing her.

"In my heart, I wanted to strangle him," she says. "Like with both hands and both feet. But I knew I had a baby and I'd go to jail. So I couldn't do anything."

Brown says he wasn't the only man to bother her, and alleges that she pleaded with her co-workers to stop it. "We're not at a party, we're here to work," Brown says she told the men. "I'm not here to flirt with you. I need this job. Please leave me alone."

Brown tells me a story that is also in her court filing. There was another male worker who reeked of booze and began asking her personal questions about her life and what she liked in a man. One night, she finished her shift before dawn (the Tesla factory runs 24/7) and started making her way to her car in the vast car park. It wasn't a picnic at the best of times – this is where the worker allegedly shot another employee. That night was worse, Brown says. She heard the drunken man shouting for her to give him a ride home. He staggered after her. Brown started running in a jagged pattern trying to lose him, but the task was made harder because she was wearing so many layers of clothes. She eventually lost the man and slipped into her car. She let out a scream of rage before driving home.

"I grew up in Oakland, and I know how to avoid people on drugs or drinking, but I didn't think I'd have to do it at work," Brown tells me. "It was Covid. I needed the money for my baby."

She brought the workplace home and would yell at her partner to not touch or comfort her. He suggested she quit, and Brown snapped back that they needed the money. So she kept going to Tesla. About two months later, Brown went to work and found out her badge would not let her enter. She called a co-worker, who asked a supervisor about it, and they reported back to Brown that her contract had been terminated. The reason? She says Tesla argued that she had been away from her workstation too much. She was crushed.

"I was just trying to get away from the men who were harassing me," Brown says. "I begged them to move me or them. They never listened. Instead, they fired me."

That was 18 months ago. Since then, Brown says, she has battled anxiety and gets nervous about leaving her house to run routine errands. She now has a job in a San Francisco hair salon, but she says she has trouble riding the BART train to work. "I can't handle anyone sitting behind me or getting on and sitting next to me," Brown says. "I'm working on it."

Now, that fear and depression seem to have turned to anger. At the end of our conversation, I ask Brown if people would buy Musk's car if they knew what she alleges happened in his company's plants. She lets out a little laugh and considers what she would do if someone gave her a Tesla.

"I'd drive that Tesla down to the factory," Brown says. "And I'd burn it."

EDEN MEDEROS didn't like to fight traffic, so she often spent 14 hours a day working at the Centinela Tesla service centre in suburban Los Angeles. Arriving around 6.30 am, she liked the first hour in the morning twilight. Mederos wasn't getting paid for that first hour, but she got a lot done, unlocking the place, scheduling appointments, and getting keys ready for customers picking up their cars. The other thing she says she cherished about her morning time was that no one was harassing her.

She claims it started early in her time at Tesla. Mederos' job title was "concierge", but her responsibilities ran from organising maintenance appointments to dealing with Tesla owners grappling with the latest update to

their car's digital dashboard. Mederos doesn't have kids, so there were no cute snapshots to personalise her desk, but dinosaurs take her to a happy place. "I'm a big *Jurassic Park* nerd; that's my guilty pleasure," Mederos tells me. "I just love them; they make me smile."

So she brought in some dinosaur figurines to decorate her desk one morning. She placed the dinosaurs and went off to help a customer. A half-hour later she came back, and claims she could hear many of the almost-all-male staff giggling: the dinosaurs had been rearranged in sexual positions. This wasn't a huge surprise to Mederos, she alleges, since Musk had ground the "69" meme into dust, captioning a screenshot with "Nice" after his twitter followers hit 69 million. Mederos and the other women Rolling Stone spoke with say male Tesla workers found it hilarious, the female workers did not. She restored her dinosaurs to their original positions, but every time she stepped away, she alleges, someone fucked with them, so she took them home at the end of the day.

By that point, Mederos felt that complaining wouldn't do any good. She says she'd already stopped eating at work because whether it was a banana or yogurt, someone would make sex noises and ask her "How much more can you fit into your mouth?" Mederos claims co-workers passed the time throwing coins and crumpled paper at her and other women, aimed to go down their shirts.

Mederos recently moved from Los Angeles to the Portland, Oregon, area. She likes the laid-back feel and says she had mostly healed from working at Tesla between 2016 and 2019. But after talking to her I'm not so sure. She was stoked when she was hired by Tesla after working for 10 years with special-needs kids. "I thought I was pretty tough," says Mederos. "I've been knocked down a flight of stairs at work." Mederos says she was psyched to be working for Tesla, a company trying to reduce carbon-dioxide emissions. "We are watching our planet dying. It was great wanting to be a part of something doing something about that."

But there were warning signs. The centre had about 30 employees, and only three were women. (The other women Rolling Stone talked to also cite a rough 10-to-one male-female ratio at Tesla.)

Shortly after starting, Mederos says, she told her boss that she had problems hearing certain tones and voices with her right ear. This got around, and apparently many of the men she worked with thought she was deaf. A technician allegedly called out "I've never seen a white girl with an ass like her." The same tech guy eventually learned that Mederos was half-Cuban. One day, she claims, he sidled up to her. "That explains why you have an ass." This atmosphere encouraged two other workers to ask her if she could hold a cup up with just her butt. The tech guy, per Mederos' legal filing, also once remarked on the breasts of a girl visiting the centre, and was unfazed when he was told the girl was 12. "Those tits are not 12," he allegedly said.

"The place was toxic before Eden got there," says a former Tesla employee who worked with Mederos and left the company feeling the culture was inappropriate and obnoxious. "A guy would start there and seem like a nice guy, but then he wanted to be part of the group and just started being awful. Other women got harassed – Eden just got it more."

Mederos says her first supervisor was sympathetic but useless, telling her that's just how men talked at Tesla. Occasionally, employees would be compelled to watch videos on sexual harassment. That only made things worse, according to Mederos. Men would touch Mederos' arm and leg, and say in a mocking tone, "Oh, no, I'm sexually harassing you." After the announcement of the S3XY line, the men at the service centre started calling everything "sexy" – "This pen is so sexy, this stapler is so sexy."

"There were conversations about it," says Mederos. "They would say, 'Well, [Musk] says it, so why can't we say any of this stuff?' "

Her second supervisor, according to her filing, was even more of a nightmare. He would block doorways as she tried to enter offices, she claims. One day, Mederos alleges, she and that supervisor took a Tesla for a test drive. She claims that before they pulled out of the car park, her supervisor placed his hand on her shoulder and told her that her strong personality was holding her back at the company.

"You should be calmer; that is what is expected of a woman."

Mederos says she jumped out of the car at the first red light and walked back to the centre. Eventually, Mederos alleges, she reached out to HR to plead her case. The HR rep listened and agreed to meet with her. Mederos says she was somewhat optimistic as she arrived for the meeting in a conference room. That was immediately crushed. She opened the door, and her boss was sitting at a table with the HR rep. Mederos couldn't believe it. She felt like she was going to throw up.

"You've made some aggressive accusations," she says the HR rep told her.

Mederos tried to explain her side of things. But she says her supervisor shouted her down.

"Everything you say is complete bullshit!"

He kept yelling until he stalked out of the room, she claims.

Mederos couldn't stop crying. The HR rep told her to take the rest of the day off.

She pauses when she tells me this part of the story. It's been two years, but she still blames herself.

"First I was shocked," recalls Mederos. "And then I was just so angry at myself. Everybody had told me that if I go to HR, this sort of thing would happen. I knew from then on, I was gonna be so screwed."

She tried to transfer to another Tesla service centre. Her supervisor slow-walked it for months, she says. Eventually, she moved to a Tesla centre in nearby Torrance. Things were better for a while. Then, according to her court filing, her old boss showed up without any reason. He allegedly sat on Mederos' desk menacingly. She tried to avoid eye contact. He began to speak to her.

"What are you doing?"

"Working."

"That's a change."

He then stalked away, but would occasionally return so she knew he was watching her. She claims she told her new supervisor about the incident, but he took no action. In a separate conversation, she asked him why men doing her same job were making more money than her, and why she had not been promoted despite excellent reviews. He gave her an impassive look and said, "If you are only in it for the money, you should quit now."

Mederos began dreading going to work. She

"Everybody had told me that if I go to HR, this sort of thing would happen. I knew I was gonna be so screwed" — *Mederos*

ISTOCK

would leave her house in the morning and get increasingly anxious the closer she got to the service centre.

In November 2019, her supervisor allegedly began screaming at her for his own mistake. Mederos ran to her car and never set foot in a Tesla office again.

"I just broke down in tears and told the assistant manager that I was leaving, and I couldn't come back. I've never walked out on a job, ever," says Mederos, who has been working since she was 14.

Mederos is doing better now that she is in Portland. But sometimes anger creeps in. Recently, Mederos and her boyfriend ordered a car service to take them to the airport. Her boyfriend was excited when the car picking them up was a Tesla. He talked about how he had always wanted to ride in one. Mederos got angry at her partner. She laughs about the experience for a second. But then she turns grim.

"I loved those cars," says Mederos in a monotone. "Now, if I see one, it just makes me anxious and sad."

CHANGE ALWAYS STARTS with one step. One worker not willing to accept things as they are. One worker with the courage to speak up. That woman in this case was Jessica Barraza. One day, San Francisco attorney David Lowe received a voicemail from Barraza. In a shaky but strong voice, the 39-year-old mother of two detailed her three years of hell at Tesla. Lowe set up a meeting with her. After hearing her account, Lowe asked her a difficult question. He was sure that other women had similar experiences. Would Barraza be willing to go public and do some interviews? Barraza said yes.

Within a month, Lowe's law firm had heard from the other six women it now represents. They have never been in the same room together partly because of the pandemic and partly because many of them now fear social situations. Still, two of them tell me that they would have not come forward if Barraza had not taken that first step.

"It took courage for her to do that," Lowe tells me. "We might not have heard from the other women. Jessica let them know they were not alone."

It has not come without a cost to Barraza.

One summer day at Lowe's office, the quiet of a San Francisco afternoon suddenly ends as a screaming motorcycle rips up the street. Eight floors up, Barraza's body jerks and recoils in a conference room. Her hands shake. Her arm features tattoos with her parents' names and she cradles a clear plastic bag filled with prescription bottles for depression, anxiety, and insomnia (she is on medical leave from Tesla). Barraza has done nothing wrong, but still she apologises. "I'm so sorry." Her lip quivers. "Ever since Tesla, loud noises scare me." She begins to cry. "I just feel ashamed they made me feel like this."

Barraza's father had run a transmission-repair shop in San Jose. As a child, she had heard men talk in macho terms about their rides. Entering the predominantly male world of Tesla didn't faze her. Besides, in 2018, she and her husband, Perfecto, had two sons who were nearing college age. They needed the money. She was making only $10 an hour at a Modesto boutique. Tesla was offering $19 an hour.

"That's Bay Area pay compared to Central Valley pay," says Barraza. "There was no question I'd do it. I'm not a big save-the-Earth person, but I thought this was something that would make my children's and grandchildren's world a little better."

She lets out a bashful smile. "I knew a lot of the work involved robots, and that sounded cool."

Barraza began work at Tesla installing cooling fans. She'd assemble the fan, and when a car rolled towards her, she'd take the fan and rivet it into place, and do it again and again for 12 hours.

The hard work didn't bother her, it was the alleged behaviour of her fellow Tesla workers that did. Barraza had to walk across the factory floor to reach her workstation. She alleges she could hear workers shouting about her as she walked by.

"That bitch hella thick."

"She's got fat titties."

"She has a fat ass."

"Oh, man, I want to fuck the shit out of her."

She says she was reminded of movies where new prisoners are dropped at jail and paraded before ravenous long-timers.

(Tesla filed a motion to compel arbitration and dismiss or stay Barraza's case, disputing Barraza's account, which Tesla alleges "relies on an embellished and disputed account of past events". In support of its defence, Tesla offered up numerous sworn declarations from current Tesla workers who claimed that they never heard Barraza complain about this sort of behaviour, and asserted that they did not hear catcalls or other obscene remarks, and that they would have reported them if they had. In its filings, Tesla also alleges that Barraza had problems with attendance, and one supervisor claims that Barraza often talked to him about not wanting to work.)

For the first year, Barraza claims, she endured the behaviour she insists happened. She needed the job and, she reasoned, no one wanted to hear a new employee complain about working conditions. So, she says, she put up with it. Besides, like Blickman, she claims some of her bosses were the worst offenders. There was the lead in her section who, she alleges in the complaint, had her phone number for work purposes, and began texting her.

"I just think you sexy asf and wanted to kick it... you know I always had a crush on yo fine ass."

Barraza says she told him that she was married, something he already knew. He texted back: "You know that only makes me want you more, right?"

Like many of the women I talk with, in addition to the alleged verbal abuse, Barraza also claims in her suit that she dealt with other workers touching and rubbing against her "accidentally" as she tried to do her job. One worker wouldn't let her pass in tight quarters, she alleges. Instead, he picked her up by the hips and moved her whole body. Later, a female worker came up behind her and put her hand on the small of Barraza's back and asked her a question.

"Is your butt real?"

Barraza marched over to a supervisor.

"If she touches me again, I will fuck her shit up."

According to her court filing, the supervisor said he wouldn't take any action, and chalked up the touching to "cultural differences". (In its filings, however, Tesla claims that Barraza's

"Some of them are 18 or 19. I'm pretty tough, so if I can't handle it, what do you think those girls will do?" — *Barraza*

BUILDING THE FUTURE The Tesla building in Fremont, California, is home to one of the world's most state-of-the-art car factories. Occupying 5.3 million sq. ft of manufacturing and office space, the facility was previously owned by General Motors

account is false, including alleging that it was Barraza who didn't want to file an HR report and that the woman was an elderly Filipino woman and English isn't her first language. Tesla also claims Barraza's supervisor had another supervisor speak with the woman in her language and explain that it's never appropriate to touch others at work.)

After a while, Barraza says, she stopped reporting other alleged incidents to her supervisors, as she felt they did not care. She was tough, but after two years, she was starting to fall apart. At home, she told herself that she was doing this for her sons. Still, she couldn't sleep at night.

One day, she alleges in the complaint, she scanned her badge and turned to leave, but a man had stepped up behind her and put his leg between her legs and rubbed his groin against her. She screamed.

"What the fuck?"

The stranger smiled.

"Oh, my bad."

He disappeared into the factory.

Barraza went back to her workstation, but started having a panic attack, she says.

"She called me early that morning," a Tesla co-worker who says she witnessed much of what Barraza endured tells me. "She was just completely distraught. She was just broken."

Barraza bolted the factory, and says she told her supervisor over the phone what happened. They told her to take her scheduled days off and they'd look into it. (According to Tesla's filings, her supervisor and a co-worker dispute her account. Both say they offered to help her, and also told her she shouldn't have left the factory without telling someone.)

Barraza tells me she took the extra step of emailing an HR director the next day, but says she felt stonewalled. After two days off, she went back to work. Her hands began to tremble when she was told it was time for the morning stretches. She couldn't bear to have strangers behind her as she bent and stretched her body. Instead, she went to her workstation and began stacking all the materials she would need that day. But, she says, her body rebelled, her throat constricted, and she couldn't breathe. She barely remembers driving home. (Tesla workers admit they heard from a distressed Barraza after she fled the factory.)

Barraza says she didn't leave her bedroom for three weeks. Her husband brought her meals and had to help her shower. Her sons whispered at the door to see if she was OK. She and Perfecto talked about what they should do. They decided to get a lawyer.

Taking on the world's richest man and his company hasn't come without a cost. She used to be able to take her kids down to LA on a whim; now, she says, she needs someone to watch her as she goes out to get the mail. "I'm just a blue-collar worker," she says. "He has everything. I just get so afraid."

I ask her if she felt pride or a sense of solidarity when other women started filling suits alleging the same kind of abuse. She shakes her head.

"No, I feel sad for them. Some of them are 18 or 19, and it's their first job. I'm pretty tough, so if I can't handle it, what do you think those girls will do?"

One of those young women was 19-year-old Samira Sheppard, who filed a harassment suit after Barraza. In its filings, Tesla emphasises that Sheppard has returned to work at Tesla and hasn't lodged any complaints since. But according to Sheppard's filings, there was a good reason she went back: economic desperation – a condition most of the women said was a factor in staying at Tesla longer than they otherwise would have. "I found a job working as a hostess at Applebees, but the pay was meagre," claimed Sheppard. "I was on the verge of not being able to afford a place to live, so I applied to work at Tesla."

These days, Barraza doesn't see a lot of Teslas in working-class Modesto. But when she does, she's struck with the same feeling: "I just wonder how many women were abused to make that one car."

IT COULD TAKE years for the women's lawsuits to find their way to a courtroom, if their lawyers succeed in keeping them out of arbitration. According to their lawyers, a common tactic in these types of cases is to delay until the complainant goes away, or accepts a settlement and signs an NDA. Tesla has already filed motions to have the cases moved to binding arbitration and dismissed from court. A judge denied that request in Barraza's case, but Tesla has filed the same motion in the other six cases. Lowe guesses the cases might not hit trial until 2024.

Tesla's lawyers, in their motion to dismiss Barraza's case, disputed her claims, calling them "false" and pointing to a slew of policies and procedures to combat harassment, including recent advancements in HR procedures: "[Tesla] has made significant changes to its harassment policies, practices, and procedures over the past year." One of the programmes, "Respectful Recharge," was started in December 2021, a month after Barraza's suit was filed.

Musk recently sent a tweet in the hours after *The Wall Street Journal* ran a story accusing him of breaking up the marriage of Google founder Sergey Brin by sleeping with Brin's wife. It wasn't a denial of the affair; that would come later. Instead the richest man in the world tweeted a meme about a criminal being sentenced to 68 years in jail and asking the judge for one more year so he could reach the hallowed "69".

A week later, a Tesla stockholder made a motion at a shareholders meeting requesting that the company issue an annual report on its efforts to prevent sexual harassment. Musk currently owns 14 per cent of Tesla after selling $6.9 billion in Tesla stock – get it? His support would have carried the day. Instead, Tesla released a statement: "The Board continues to oppose initiatives that seek to direct Tesla's strategic business decisions and day-to-day operations in ways that are not critical to or in furtherance of Tesla's core mission." The motion failed.

Elon Musk remains on-brand.

ISTOCK

Severe health issues had the Prince of Darkness worried he'd never go onstage again. Inside his latest comeback

OZZY: BACK FROM HELL

BY KORY GROW

TERRY SMITH/CAMERA

AS SOON AS a pair of silver vans arrive at the VIP entrance of Birmingham's Alexander Stadium, the whispers start. "Is that Sharon Osbourne?" a squinting security guard asks her friend.

"I think so," the other guard says. "Does that mean...?"

The drivers keep security in the dark – literally – by turning off their dome lights as they wait for Prince Edward to finish a speech for the closing ceremonies of the Commonwealth Games that took place in early August. The vans creep towards the stage. That's when the crowd of 30,000 hears a bass drum: *thump, thump, thump, thump*.

"*I am Iron Man*!" a familiar voice bellows from the ether, as Black Sabbath's Tony Iommi struts onstage. Fifty-four years earlier, Sabbath, whose members all grew up in Birmingham, defied their foregone destinies as steelworkers to forge their own brand of metal.

A trapdoor opens and a lithe silhouette with arms outstretched levitates to Iommi's height. "Come on, Birmingham, let's hear you," the figure commands as a spotlight reveals Sabbath's founding frontman, Ozzy Osbourne, sporting a Cheshire-cat smile.

This is when the audience recognises Birmingham's hometown hero, and their disbelief turns deafening as Sabbath shifts from 'Iron Man' to their biggest hit, 'Paranoid'. It turns out the performance was such a secret that Ozzy's son Louis, who happened to be in the audience, is in disbelief as he spots his dad onstage.

I join Sharon and Kelly Osbourne in the front row, among the athletes. They appear overjoyed, and for good reason. This is Ozzy's first onstage appearance in nearly three years, after a series of injuries and surgeries that left him thinking he might never perform again.

Ozzy's health looked dire there for a while. But here he is uttering catchphrases like "Let's go crazy!" and "God bless you all!" without missing a beat. As the song ends and pyro streams around him, he howls, "Birmingham forever!"

As soon as the lights dim, he and his family escape to their vans to beat the street closures Brits are accustomed to whenever a royal makes a public appearance. Forget Prince Edward – make way for the Prince of Darkness.

WHEN I MEET Osbourne the next afternoon in a posh London hotel suite, he's just woken up. "I must have been fucking exhausted because I never sleep this late," he says, tumbling onto a couch. He situates himself for maximum comfort and asks for a Diet Coke.

He's dressed casually in a black T-shirt and black track pants. Ozzy, 73, stopped colouring his hair during the pandemic and has pulled his salt-and-pepper locks back into a small ponytail. He's sporting purple-lensed Lennon shades, but when he pulls them down, his blue eyes still pierce with intensity. Occasionally, he fiddles with his hearing aids. Even though he uses a silver-filigreed cane to get around and fidgets like he's in pain while seated for our two-and-a-half-hour first interview, the Birmingham performance has visibly brightened his spirits. He's constantly animated, throwing pillows around and making eye contact to underscore a point. "Fuck" is still his favourite word – he uses it exactly 540 times in the few hours that we spend together, approximately two-and-a-half times per minute – and he uses it impressively in a variety of ways and inflections.

"Up until last night, I was semi-retired," he says, lifting his head for emphasis. "For three years, I'm thinking, 'I'm never going onstage.' I kind of half-bought myself into the fact that [my performing career] was over."

Osbourne's agony began in 2018, during what was supposed to be his final world tour. He contracted a potentially deadly staph infection, likely from shaking fans' hands at a meet-and-greet, which swelled his thumb up to the size of a lightbulb. He eventually felt healthy enough to headline a New Year's Eve Ozzfest, but soon after, he fell at home in the middle of the night and aggravated a spinal injury he'd initially suffered during a nearly fatal quad-bike accident in 2003. After the 2019 tumble, the Iron Man found himself with two metal plates in his neck.

Osbourne postponed months of tour dates as he underwent extensive physical therapy and treatment for what he calls "scrambled nerves" in his arm and leg. During his recovery, he recorded an album, 2020's *Ordinary Man*, which featured Elton John, Slash and Post Malone. As he was promoting it, he revealed that doctors had diagnosed him with Parkinson's disease. Then Covid happened. Osbourne avoided the plague until this past April. His symptoms were mild, but since then, he says, his hair has been falling out and his fingernails are breaking off. "I can't begin to tell you how fucked up I felt," he says.

In June, he underwent corrective surgery that Sharon told the media would "determine the rest of his life." Afterwards, the screws in the metal plates in his neck were digging into his spine and leaving debris. "It was a fucking nightmare," Sharon says. Thankfully, the surgeon removed the plates, and Ozzy has felt better since.

That paved the way for the Birmingham appearance. "I can't really believe it happened," Sharon tells me later. "They asked us six months ago, and we had to say no. And then they called us literally days before to say, 'We'd seen Ozzy [make an appearance] at Comic-Con, and he seems to be doing well. Do you think he could do it?' And I asked Ozzy, and he was like, 'Yeah. Why not?'"

He may look like the picture of confidence when he's onstage, but offstage he's his own worst critic. "I never think I'm going to win," he says. Before the Birmingham concert, he was worrying: "These kids don't know who the fuck I am."

In fact, Osbourne has been making comebacks his whole life. After school teachers slipped a dunce cap on him, he went on to co-found Sabbath and help invent heavy metal. When Sabbath kicked him out, he became a solo superstar. He thumbed his nose at Lollapalooza's organisers when they called him a dinosaur and formed his own Ozzfest. He even survived fickle TV fame with *The Osbournes*, laying the groundwork for reality-TV families like the Kardashians.

Now, he has a ripping new album, *Patient Number 9*, featuring guest appearances by Iommi, Eric Clapton and Jeff Beck, as well as members of Metallica, Guns N' Roses, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

The crazy train finally seems to be back on track.

"My family have been fucking terrific. They've been so fucking supportive and patient"

"YOU KNOW Winston Churchill used to stay here?" Osbourne asks, admiring the gold-leafed ornamentation on the walls of his suite. Claridge's opened in 1898, and the hotel is still the sort of place where top-hatted men in heavy coats open your car door for you. "Sharon loves it here," Ozzy notes.

Following his most recent surgery, when Osbourne's stamina was at its lowest, he told his wife, "I'm sorry if I'm a burden." She told him not to be silly. "My family have been fucking terrific – my kids, my wife – they've been so fucking supportive and so patient," he says. So have his friends.

"We're in touch quite a lot," Iommi, who lives in England, thousands of miles from the Osbournes' LA home, told me last year. "We don't really speak because the pair of us are useless on the phone. He used to phone me at two o'clock in the morning, and I'd go, 'Ozz, it's two o'clock in the morning.' 'Oh, oh, sorry. All right. Bye.' He forgets what time it is in England, and of course when the phone goes at that time of the morning you think, 'Oh, Christ. Somebody's died or something has happened.' So we tend to sort of just text now."

In addition to rebuilding his body, Osbourne has been reconstituting his confidence. Sometimes he'll tell Sharon, "Performing is the only thing I've done in my life that's right or that I'm good at."

"I tell him, 'It's not true,'" she says. "He's had his struggles, and they've all been very public. But it's not true; he's hard on himself."

Ozzy first met Sharon in the mid-70s when her dad, Don Arden, started managing Sabbath. "I always thought that Ozzy had a beautiful face and was really different, personality-wise, but I was a little apprehensive," she says now. "I'd been used to going out with lawyers and people that worked at record companies, and he was very different, and all of those people I found incredibly boring."

REBORN (Clockwise from above) With Sharon, Kelly, and Jack when *The Osbournes* ruled reality TV, which is returning to screens; Ozzy this year; making a surprise appearance at the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham: "Up until last night, I was semi-retired," he said the next day. "For three years, I'm thinking, 'I'm never going onstage.."

Ozzy was far from boring, though, when Sharon visited him shortly after he was fired from Sabbath in 1979 for intoxicating himself to the point of uselessness. "I just wanted to get fucked up," he says. "It was over." Still, she saw a spark inside of him and encouraged him to try a solo career; she even became his manager. Although Ozzy was still married to his first wife, Thelma, with whom he had three children, Ozzy and Sharon fell in love.

Ozzy hired a backing band, which prominently featured Randy Rhoads. The Quiet Riot guitarist had an unusual approach to heavy metal, inspired more by Beethoven than Sabbath, and a glammy look.

Thanks to Sharon's sharp management, hits like 'Crazy Train', and a series of notorious press, uh, opportunities – like Ozzy drunkenly biting the heads off a dove and a bat – he was soon doing better business than Black Sabbath, which had continued with new singer Ronnie James Dio.

The party ended quickly, though, in March 1982, when the tour's bus driver used a day off to entice Rhoads and hairdresser Rachel Youngblood onto a private plane. When he tried to buzz the tour bus, the plane flew into a mansion, killing everyone on board. "I had two fucking funerals in one week – it was awful," Osbourne says. "Since then, I can't go to funerals anymore. It just puts me in a freakout. I just couldn't go to my family members' funerals."

On 4 July 1982, Ozzy and Sharon married in Maui, Hawaii. This year, they celebrated their 40th anniversary by going to a hotel and locking the door. "We had the best time, never left the room, got room service, talked about our lives together," Sharon says. "It was perfect for us."

"I bought Sharon a ruby, 'cos it's our ruby anniversary," Ozzy says. "I paid a lot of money for it – $150,000 – for this tiny ruby. I said to Sharon, 'I think these fucking guys ripped me off. I wouldn't pay 70 grand for it.' Rubies are really rare."

After Rhoads' death, Osbourne soldiered through the 80s with guitarists Jake E. Lee and Zakk Wylde by his side, scoring MTV hits with 'Bark at the Moon' and 'Shot in the Dark'. "I felt like the luckiest contest winner of all time," says Wylde, who joined Osbourne at 19. "I'd be pinching myself."

Meanwhile, Osbourne's drinking and drug use escalated. While admiring Claridge's fireplace, Osbourne twice mentions he tried to strangle Sharon during a blackout episode in 1989. "It wasn't my idea to go out, have a few drinks, and wake up in jail charged with attempted murder," he says, still kicking himself. Sharon eventually dropped the charges.

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: MICHAEL YARISH/MTV/GETTY IMAGES; ROSS HALFIN; ALAMY; OPPOSITE: CHRIS WALTER/WIREIMAGE

GENIUS Ozzy with Randy Rhoads, who helped reinvent metal before dying tragically

"He was sent to a lockdown, and we were apart for a long time while he was in treatment," Sharon says. "At first, I had relief in my life. But then after a couple of months, I missed him so much. The children were missing their dad every day. 'When's Daddy coming home?' And I missed him. I missed his craziness." She took him back.

Osbourne has tested the limits of his marriage since. In 2013, as Sabbath were launching their first album with Ozzy since they fired him, he became addicted to pain pills before sobering up. Then, in 2016, Sharon learned Ozzy had been carrying on an affair with his hairstylist. Ozzy then sought what he described as "intense therapy" for sex addiction. The couple stuck together.

When I ask Osbourne why his marriage has survived, he shrugs. "I don't know, but I've got a good wife, I think," he says. "She's been in rock'n'roll all her life. But she loves me, I love her. I haven't been the exact perfect husband, but she's fucking right about a lot of things."

"I knew that I was marrying an alcoholic," Sharon says. "So what did I expect other than a bumpy ride? We've had more good times than bad. So I regret nothing. I saved Ozzy, and he saved me."

"Is it hot in here or am I... fucking hell," Osbourne says. "We haven't quite reached America yet with the air conditioning [in England]."

After a couple of hours speaking in the suite downstairs at Claridge's, we've moved into his family's room upstairs, where he's about to take a nap. Ozzy, barefoot, lies supine on a couch in front of a bay window overlooking London's posh Mayfair neighbourhood (Buckingham Palace is walkable from here) as he gripes about the summer heatwave. "People don't believe that climate change is real," he says frustratingly. "Look out the fucking window. Everything's all frizzled."

Osbourne's politics lean liberal. Four years of Donald Trump, a man he likens to "A.H. – Adolf Hitler," had him worried the president would blow up the planet. Yesterday, as Osbourne and Iommi were reuniting in Birmingham, the FBI raided Trump's Florida home, Mar-a-Lago – and Osbourne gleefully watched the news reports. He has also been enjoying seeing 6 January insurrectionists get indicted. "They're dishing out some sentences," he says. "They should do [Trump]."

Ozzy and Sharon are planning to return to their 350-acre estate outside London next year. Although Ozzy has quipped that he's leaving America because he's afraid of mass shootings, he offers a more reasonable explanation to me: he wants to be closer to his family in England and avoid high taxes that, he thinks, are coming to America to help rebuild after the pandemic.

As we're chatting, Kelly enters to say hi. She, too, has had it with England's heatwave, especially since she's visibly pregnant with her first child with boyfriend and

Slipknot keyboardist Sid Wilson. (They met at Ozzfest). When she leaves the room, Ozzy beams with pride and tells me the gender of Kelly's unborn baby. And in a delightfully *Osbournes* moment, Kelly yells from another room, "*Dad!*" His pride turns sheepish, and he says, "Sorry." When she's out of earshot, he tells me, "I'm kind of over the moon. She looks really well."

Last March marked the 20th anniversary of *The Osbournes*, the reality series that put Ozzy's family under a microscope for three years while turning them into superstars. He recalls the moment when he realised just how big the show had become. "I was travelling along the 405 one day, and I said to my guy, 'I need to go to the bathroom. Pull over where you can,'" he recalls. "He pulled over at this quite-big McDonald's. I went into the bathroom; it was fucking empty. By the time I got out, the fucking entire restaurant was out in the car park by my car.

"Three years of that was fucking nuts," he continues. "The kids were all drinking booze and doing this and that. I was back on booze, because when you have a camera crew in your fucking house 24/7, you start to get fucking freaked out, you know?

"I have to take my hat off to the Kardashians, although I don't understand it. They must be fucking thick-skinned, because that would drive me fucking nuts. It's been going now for 15 years or something."

Despite Osbourne's misgivings, the BBC announced in early September that the family would be rebooting the series as Ozzy and Sharon settle back into their Buckinghamshire abode, promising to touch on Kelly's soon-to-be-born child and Ozzy's upcoming tour, among other topics. (Unlike Ozzy, Sharon likes doing TV. She served as a judge on *The X Factor* and *America's Got Talent* before joining *The Talk* as a co-host in 2010. For 11 seasons, she offered hot takes on current events, sometimes playing the heel in debates. She left the show last year after a dust-up with co-host Sheryl Underwood, centring around Sharon's support for her friend, British journalist Piers Morgan, who had come under fire for racist comments about Meghan Markle. "Please hear me when I say I do not condone racism, misogyny, or bullying," Osbourne tweeted later. She now hosts a chat show, also called *The Talk*, on the British network TalkTV.

Reflecting on *The Osbournes*' original run, Ozzy is proud of his kids for weathering TV megafame. Jack now hosts TV shows and is producing a biopic about Ozzy and Sharon's romance. (Ozzy wants an unknown to play him, not "fucking Johnny Depp".) Kelly was a commentator on *Fashion Police* for several years and appeared on *The Masked Singer*. Aimee, the couple's eldest daughter, who chose not to appear on the show, records synth-wave music under the moniker ARO.

Ozzy is especially impressed by his eldest son, Louis, who "does these fucking iron-man things". Once I clarify he means athletics and not Ozzy's kind of 'Iron Man', he explains: "He cycled fucking 15 miles, swam something, like, 10 miles, ran 20 miles, bikes. The last one took him nearly 14 hours. I said, 'Louis, that's why they invented fucking cars.'"

Sharon is still Ozzy's lodestar. His darkest place – "the one thing that I'm fucking freaking myself out about," he says – is when he imagines Sharon dying before him. "That's a fucking no-no for me," he says, readjusting his position on the couch. "I couldn't survive without her. She's everything. At the end of the day, I wish we could both go lie down and go off together, but it don't work that way. I don't know how people get over that."

I STILL DO Ozzy and Sharon have been together for 40 years

BY HIS OWN ESTIMATION, Ozzy is unusually excited about his new album. When Andrew Watt, a 31-year-old producer whose credits include Miley Cyrus and Justin Bieber, suggested Osbourne ask Eric Clapton and Jeff Beck – two guitarists who played in one of his favourite bands, the Yardbirds – to play on his record, the Prince of Darkness scoffed. "I'm going, 'Andrew, they're going to think I'm fucking mad,'" he says, adding, "Well, I am." When

ALAMY

both agreed, Osbourne couldn't believe his luck.

"Ozzy acts like a fan," Sharon says. "Ozzy's a fan of Eric and Jeff Beck. And so for him, it's like, 'Oh, wow. I actually got to work with those people.'"

A few years back, he and Wylde went to see Elton John live. "It was just hit after hit after hit after hit," the guitarist says. "Me and Ozzy were just watching, high-fiving each other, fist-bumping each other after 'Rocket Man' or 'Don't Let the Sun Go Down on Me.' We're like, 'Wow, that's pretty amazing.' I go, 'You're not too shabby either, bro.' He just giggled. He doesn't view himself with his peers."

Other guests on *Patient Number 9* include Iommi and Pearl Jam's Mike McCready. Metallica's Robert Trujillo, a former Ozzy band member, and Guns N' Roses' Duff McKagan play bass, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers' Chad Smith and the late Foo Fighters drummer Taylor Hawkins both sit behind the kit. It's a *This Is Your Life* collection of the artists who influenced, played with, and were inspired by Osbourne, and, even with all the star power, it never feels like anything other than an Ozzy Osbourne album.

The only thing Sharon asked Watt for with *Patient Number 9* was that the album be heavier than *Ordinary Man*. Enter Tony Iommi. When I ask about 'Degradation Rules', one of two tracks with Iommi on guitar, Osbourne asks, "You know what that's about, don't you?" before making the universal jerk-off gesture. Besides drumming on the album, Hawkins made a key lyrical contribution, according to Ozzy: "He was the one that came up with the lyric '*RedTube rules*' on that. Is it BlueTube or RedTube?"

"Ozzy didn't even know what RedTube was," Watt says, referring to the porn site. "He cuts the line and Taylor jumps up and goes, 'Yes!' We told him what RedTube was afterward, and we were just crying."

Kidding aside, Osbourne was stricken when Hawkins died. "The saddest thing was when he died," Osbourne says. "He was a nice guy."

The only artist Osbourne had a little trouble working with was Eric Clapton, who added tasteful, bluesy melodies to the ballad 'One of Those Days', a track Watt says he and Ozzy wrote in a way that would inspire Clapton to use a wah-wah. Unlike Clapton, who railed against Covid-19 vaccine mandates, Osbourne got vaxxed without public protest. Their real disagreement came over the chorus to 'One of Those Days', which goes, "*It's one of those days when I don't believe in Jesus*." The lyric had come about innocently enough as Osbourne chatted with Watt about a school shooting he'd seen on the news; it was a statement about humanity. "When I sent it to Eric Clapton, he said, 'I'm not really so keen on those words,'" Osbourne recalls. "So we did try and change it: '*I don't believe it's here yet*' or something. But sometimes when you put something down, you capture a moment." Osbourne pushed back and eventually Clapton backed down. (Through a rep, Clapton declined to comment on this story.)

Clapton wasn't the only speed bump. Everyone had to mind Osbourne's health, especially during the pandemic. "It wasn't safe for Ozzy to leave the house," Watt says. "We fuckin' spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on testing to make sure that he was safe in the process of making this album."

"I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't do drugs anymore. I'm quite fucking boring"

As we talk, Osbourne mentions friends and peers who have died, often of alcoholism. Led Zeppelin's John Bonham once challenged Osbourne to "a race" with 12 bottles of champagne and 12 large scotches. "I said, 'You can fuck off,'" he laughs. (Bonham got through four bottles and shots before puking.) And then there's Lemmy, who impressed Osbourne by downing a bottle of bourbon a day for over a month. The Motörhead frontman's stated goal was to "try one of each".

Osbourne can't explain why he survived when so many friends didn't. Once, when he listed all of the drugs and drinking he'd done for his doctor, the doc said, "Why are you alive?" Osbourne couldn't answer that question then and still can't today.

He's been sober for nine years – according to Sharon. Ozzy doesn't keep count, and in fact always found the calendar-keeping associated with Alcoholics Anonymous to be a nuisance. "The way I approached it was, if I had one leg amputated, I wouldn't want to sit in a room for the rest of my life talking to other people about how I lost my leg," he says. "I just have to adapt and get on with it."

"He drank at first because he didn't have confidence and it made him feel good," Sharon says. "It gave him the confidence that he didn't have. And then it turns on you. As the disease progresses, people always get nasty, and they do bad things and fuck their lives up."

Osbourne says the reason he stays inside these days isn't because he's so famous that he would attract a car-park mob but because he's just no fun anymore. Mostly, he's a homebody who enjoys watching the History channel or walking around his estate. "I don't have many celebrity showbiz friends," he says. "I just do my own thing. I don't like to go to places where they all hang out: I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't do drugs anymore. I'm quite fucking boring."

As we round hour three of interviews, Osbourne – still on the couch, tossing around pillows – realises he's been talking a lot. "I think you're not writing an article," he says, "you're writing a fucking encyclopedia."

I explain that with all the headlines about his health, people want simply to know how he's doing. "I'm doing as good as I can be, considering the fucking crap," he says. "If you'd have seen me a year or so ago, you'd have thought, 'No. No way.' I couldn't fucking move because of what the guy did wrong on the first surgery."

Ozzy leans forward on the couch and drops his hair as if he's about to start headbanging, but instead he lets it dangle and points out a one-and-a-half-inch scar at the base of his neck. "I was so bad for a while," he says earnestly. Now, life seems manageable. His corrective surgery so far seems like a success. His Parkinson's is under control; when he holds his arms in front of him, they're still, thanks to a pill he takes three times a day. He just has to get back in shape so he can play some proper gigs.

Beyond getting back onstage, what's left for Osbourne to achieve? "Knighthood," he deadpans before cracking into a laugh. "I don't think I'll ever get knighted. Fuck that."

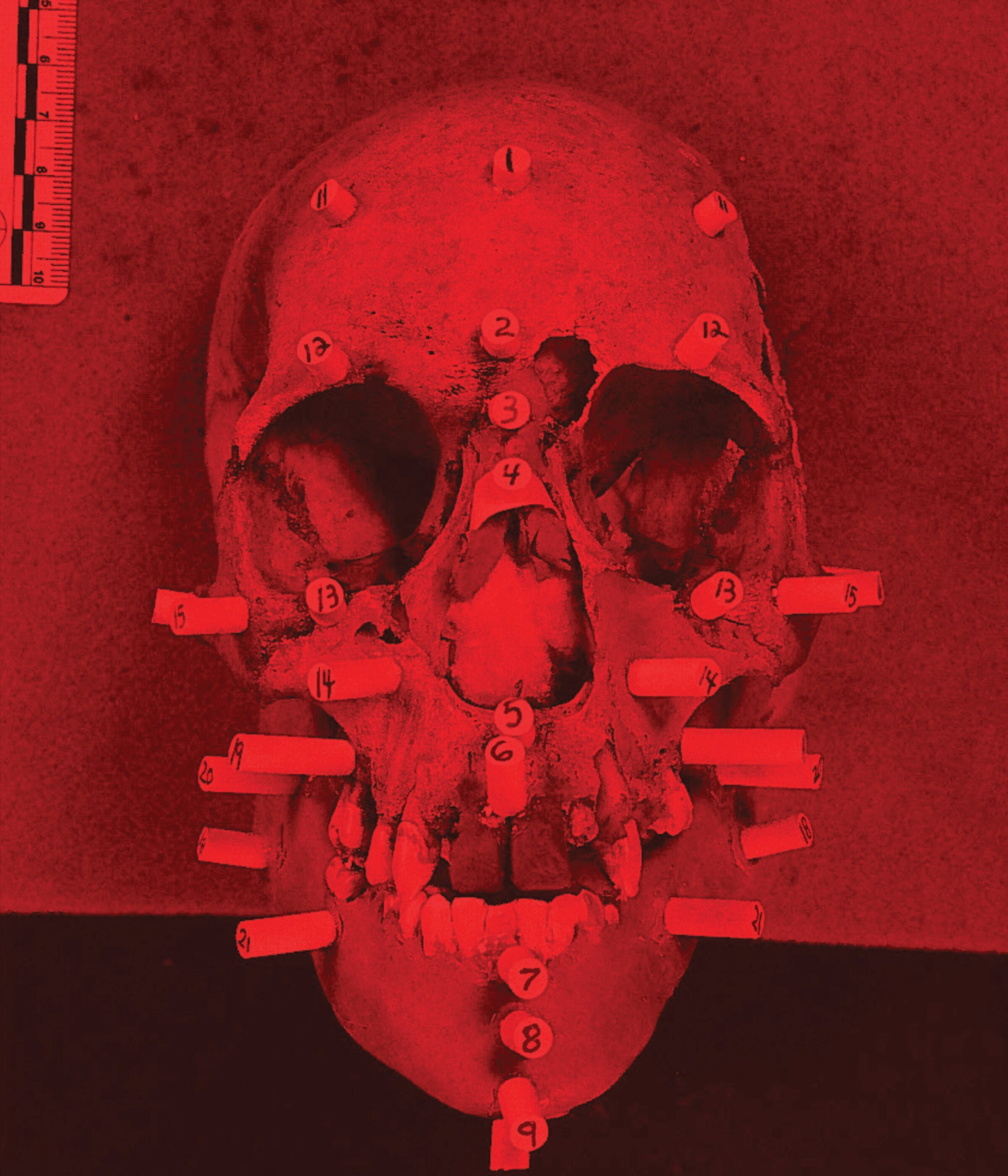
Osbourne then stands up to disappear into the evening – or at least his bedroom for a little more relaxation. As we say our goodbyes, I ask if he ever feels sorry for himself with all of his health maladies or if he feels like he's just hardwired to get on with it. "I'm no different to anybody else," he says. "I just refuse to die." ®

THE MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF AN O'JAY

Musician Frankie Little Jr. disappeared in 1979. It took 40 years to find out what happened. **By Brenna Ehrlich**

THIS STORY BEGINS IN 1982 WITH less than half a man – a pile of bones discovered under a layer of February snow, his broken skull smiling up at an adolescent worker behind his family's factory. The bones were far from home, discarded in small-town Twinsburg, Ohio, which got its name because it was founded by twins who married sisters, who died the same day and were buried in the same grave. ■ Broken and nameless, the man became a mystery that would haunt this town for decades, while industries waxed and waned and the teen who found him grew old enough to see his family's business shut down and become a ruin. For almost 40 years, he was unburied, passed down from detective to detective, a puzzle to solve as new crime-solving technologies came on the scene, promising resolutions to cold cases. ■ For four decades, this man remained a question mark, until his identity was revealed by a young detective and a cousin whose family started dabbling in genealogy. His bones no longer a challenge for rookie cops, this man – a musician, father, business owner and brother – was finally returned to his family, which had wondered for decades why he never came home. Now, there is a chance his story can finally be told.

Above: Frankie Little Jr. circa 1960. Opposite: His skull, which was found in 1982 behind a factory in Twinsburg, Ohio. The remains weren't identified until 2021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FRANKIE ROBINSON never believed that his father would willingly leave him, even after his dad vanished from his East Cleveland apartment in the late 70s, when he was five. Frankie Little Jr. loved his namesake too much. "My dad was a good person," Robinson says of his old man. "He was like any man in the music industry – my mom said that was his downfall – but I know he loved me for sure." Little, a 36-year-old guitarist and songwriter, was living with his girlfriend, Rochella Womack. He did odd jobs to make ends meet, but his true passion was the guitar. Known to friends by his stage name, Brother Rabbit, Frankie had been a member of the O'Jays when they were just starting out in the early 60s, and co-wrote a handful of songs with lead singer Eddie Levert, including 'Oh, How You Hurt Me' (1964) and 'Pretty Words' (1966). These days, he played out around the city with his band Fresh Fire, while filling his son's life with music. He bought the younger Frankie drums and serenaded him with rounds of 'Hush Little Baby', his Gibson his most constant companion.

The music ended, though, when Little didn't come home – and that day haunts Robinson, 48. The way he remembers it, he was at the apartment with Womack when someone knocked on the door. Womack told the boy to hide in the bathroom, he says. "I remember hearing the door open, and I thought it was my dad," Robinson says. He never found out who that person was; when he emerged, the man was gone. "I've never seen my dad since that day."

For her part, Womack, now 66, doesn't remember Robinson being there or what day it was specifically. All she recalls is that it was warm out and that Little was in a huff because the neighbour across the street, whom he often worked with, hadn't paid him for their most recent job. She's not sure if Little left the apartment to confront the man or if he took a long soak in the bath, which he often did when he was stressed. "I just know at a certain time of night, I was in bed, and I jumped up all of a sudden like something had happened," she says. "That was the night he disappeared and never came back."

The rest of Little's family – scattered across the country, disconnected from Little by that point – was less concerned when they didn't hear from Frankie, because that's just kind of what he did. He ghosted; he went off the grid; but he eventually came back. "The connection wasn't consistent," his nephew Shawn Little Jones recalls. "We'd have to wait for him to reach out and [get in] touch."

Jones just assumed his uncle had gone underground, maybe changed his name to something flashier. He fancied he heard Little's distinctive guitar playing on every record he put on the turntable – that same Curtis Mayfield groove that won him a spot in the O'Jays. Little's cousin Margaret O'Sullivan (née Little) thought for decades that he would walk through her front door one day, just turn up on her plush red carpet with some story or other. Her living room is crammed with family photos she wishes she could show him – his relatives growing up, having kids, and those kids achieving their dreams.

Sadly, O'Sullivan was wrong. Robinson's intuition proved to be true. As it turns out, his father was murdered, a bag of his bones found in 1982 in Twinsburg, roughly 25 miles from his home. But it wouldn't be until December 2021, after the case crossed the desk of Detective Eric Hendershott, that his remains would be identified. From there, friends, family, and authorities began piecing together the fragments of Little's legacy and how, exactly, the freewheeling musician's bones ended up abandoned under a drift of snow.

JONATHAN LAWRENCE – the boy who found the bones – hasn't been to the site of his mother's old roofing-material factory, Laurent Corp., for 20 years. He hasn't had any reason to. The factory burned down in 1992; his mother died in 2008; and even though he technically still owns the land, it's basically just a swamp now, studded with fragrant skunkweed, charred ruins, and bad memories. In the spring of 2022, however, he's back. His wheels stick in the mud as he manoeuvres his SUV through a narrow tunnel of trees to 3047 Cannon Road, which you wouldn't know was there if not for the weather-beaten sign. "You can see why we could never get a pizza delivered," Lawrence quips, lowering his Oakleys and squinting into the sun towards where he uncovered a mystery decades ago.

"I REMEMBER HEARING THE DOOR OPEN, AND I THOUGHT IT WAS MY DAD," ROBINSON SAYS. HE NEVER FOUND OUT WHO THAT PERSON WAS; WHEN HE EMERGED, THE MAN WAS GONE. "I'VE NEVER SEEN MY DAD SINCE THAT DAY"

Lawrence doesn't get out of the car when he reaches his destination, a swathe of swampy grass surrounded by trees and hemmed in by a line of condos. Instead, he points to a jumble of ruins and recalls what he says was a day back in the late 70s, when he was around 16. He remembers standing on a platform in the mixing room at the back of the building, stirring up adhesive for roofing materials. He was looking out of the window when he saw a car pull in – what police now believe was a 1957 Ford station wagon – turn around, and back up to the edge of the woods, where a Black man in blue coveralls and a driving hat dumped a bag on the ground.

"I'm standing there going, 'Damn it, I'm going to have to clean that up. Why didn't he just put it in the dumpster?'" Lawrence says; as the owner's son, the dirty work often fell to him. He didn't think much of it, though; people tossed so much rubbish back there that they left the bins unlocked.

This is where his memory fractures. Lawrence recalls going outside that day to deal with whatever the man left behind, but this actually happened later, in February 1982, according to the police report and the local paper. When pressed, he admits that he may have conflated his memories. Lawrence was poking around the trash one February day when the bag split and a skull rolled out. Being young and full of bluster, Lawrence wasn't rattled. Instead, he scooped the skull onto a shovel and brought it in to scare the new secretary. "See the kind of trash people leave behind?" he joked. "She freaks out. Completely freaks out. And calls the police," he says. "Then she tells me to take it and put it back where I found it."

When the police arrived, they discovered the rest of the bones, which they thought might belong to eight-year-old Tiffany Papesh, who disappeared in 1980. Or, perhaps, this was a gangland killing, as Twinsburg Police Chief Don Prange speculated to the *Akron Beacon Journal*. Lawrence claims bodies had been found back there in the past, before his time, and recalls police meeting informants in the shipping area after hours – his mother, Dorothy, serving them steaming cups of coffee.

Lawrence doesn't seem too bothered by the memory; he's had his share of struggles over the years that have far eclipsed that gruesome discovery. But he does shake his head when he points out a white plastic cross, festooned with a drooping fake wreath and an American flag. Frankie Little Jr.'s name is Sharpied across one of the slats, already almost faded away by the elements. "It's not in the right spot," he says, pointing to a tangle of woods several feet away

The O'Jays' original line-up

CLEVELAND'S LOST SON

Though Little's remains were found in 1982, it wasn't until 2021 that he was identified. But the search didn't stop. Right: a 2009 sketch made based on the skull. Far right: A 2017 model based on the same piece of evidence. Below: A 1982 headline about the gruesome discovery

"SOMETHING OF INTEREST TO YOU AND YOUR COMMUNITY"
NEWS 20¢
The Bullet
WEDNESDAY, FEB. 24, 1982
Twinsburg bones taken to Smithsonian
Ice causes 18 accidents in area
pays delinquent taxes

where he says he saw the mystery man dump the bag. Blurred memories or not, Lawrence can still remember where Little's bones lay.

FRANKIE JR. WAS BORN in August 1943 in Cleveland to Frankie Little Sr. and La Verda Stone, who were both entertainers at heart and jacks-of-all-trades for money. His mother died when he and his brother Johnny were young, and they grew up in the projects, living with their father, an aunt named Betty, and a sister, in turn, as the two grew up. Johnny was Frankie's only full brother, but he had a few half siblings and spent weekends hanging out with his twin cousins, Margaret and Rossie Little. "His father knew that he liked to play music and stuff like that, so his father bought him a guitar," says his cousin, O'Sullivan, recalling how he was rarely without the instrument. "He was never the type to go out and party. He never had a lot of friends. He was just into music."

While Johnny admits that he himself was a bit of a bad kid, Frankie was studious. "He didn't care nothing about sports," Johnny says. "I used to beg him to play cards. He didn't want to do that. All he wanted to do was play his guitar, write, draw, paint. We lived near a large swimming pool, and he didn't care about going swimming, basketball. He just wanted to play his guitar."

Frankie put together his first band, the Fairlanes, in the early 60s, and even had sweaters made with the band name emblazoned across them. In the mid-60s, the young musician got his big break when the O'Jays held auditions for new members, and he scored a spot on guitar; his first songwriting credit with the band was for 'Oh, How You Hurt Me'.

"[Frankie] was a very passionate guy. He loved playing his instrument, and we loved the way that he played because he played a little bit of the Curtis Mayfield style," says the O'Jays singer Eddie Levert. By then, the band had been gigging for more than five years. The group formed under a different name in 1958 and officially became the O'Jays in 1963, as a nod to Cleveland DJ Eddie O'Jay, a radio personality and the band's onetime manager.

By the time Little joined, they'd scored their first hit – 1963's 'Lonely Drifter' – but had yet to hook up with Philly producers Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff, who propelled the band up the charts after the group signed to Philadelphia International Records in the early 70s. The band continues to tour to this day – albeit without all the original members – and was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2005. "They could dance, they looked great, they always wore great stage outfits – they were the whole package," says Jason Hanley, VP of education and fan engagement at the Hall of Fame, adding that they never forgot their roots. "They were one of the biggest groups to come out of Cleveland. A lot of their music is feel-good music, which I think is why they continue to resonate with people year after year." Although a fan of the O'Jays, Hanley admits he hadn't heard of Little until recently.

When it comes to the mid-60s, though, things get a little murky for Little's friends and family. That's when Little and the O'Jays went to California, where he married a woman named Precious P. Henderson on 16 June, 1965, according to the US marriage index. The two apparently had a daughter, but neither Johnny nor the rest of his family ever met Precious or the girl, both of whom have since died. Johnny only knows that eventually Frankie got homesick and returned to Cleveland around 1967. Johnny says the day Frankie got back, two members of the armed service's military police rounded him up and took him straight to a federal building. From there, he was drafted into the Army, sent to basic training back in California, and shipped straight to Vietnam. "He was hurt because when that happened, my father had passed," Johnny says. "I think it really did affect him, to not be able to go to my father's funeral."

Johnny doesn't recall exactly when his brother finally got home, but he does remember the horrific stories he brought back: the booby traps the North Vietnamese set for the invading Americans, the heads on spikes they erected to scare off Frankie and his fellow troops. "He was a survivor, though," Johnny says. "He could take a tree trunk off the street and carve it and shellac it and sell it. He made his own clothes. He was very talented."

The brothers opened stores next to each other in the early 70s under the name Jay's Deli & Record Shop, not far from an area now known as Cleveland's Second Downtown. Today, it's crammed with medical buildings, but in those days, the neighbourhood was a hotbed of Black culture. It was largely curated by prominent

PREVIOUS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: TWINSBURG POLICE DEPARTMENT; COURTESY OF LINDA SPURLOCK, PH.D. THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: ECHOES/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES; TWINSBURG POLICE DEPARTMENT, 3

Black real estate developer Winston E. Willis, who opened venues like Scrumpy Dump Cinema and Winston's Place Fine Dining. There were also jazz clubs, movie theatres (both adult and child-friendly), and beauty shops. "It was the inner-city Disneyland," says Willis' sister, Aundra Willis Carrasco.

Although no longer with the O'Jays, Little had no shortage of creative outlets, and the neighbouring shops were a melting pot of music and collaboration. "Frankie had a little sewing room where he'd make dashikis," O'Sullivan remembers. "And he'd play his guitar. He was very talented." Jones recalls Little bringing touring bands through the shop to drum up business; he worked behind the counter at his dad's shop and flitted between the grocery and the record store when musicians filtered through. Meanwhile, Johnny kept the younger generation stocked up on sweets – and occupied with a menagerie of pinball machines. "All the neighbourhood kids came," he says. "I had the shop painted a loud orange in the front, and I had neon signs in both windows. The whole neighbourhood called me 'Jay'. It was a blessing to watch the kids grow up."

All the while, Little was playing music – and falling in love. He took up with an artist named Diana Robinson in the early 70s and had a son, Frankie Robinson, in 1974. The couple never married, and Little got together with Womack in 1973, Womack recalls. They were a musical couple and performed together often, Womack says, while Little also played with Fresh Fire. "He was so tough he could get on his knees and play the guitar with his teeth," she says.

Womack was in her late teens at the time, and lived with Little, 12 years her senior, as he moved between two homes. There was a big house not far from Frankie and Johnny's store – with beads in the doorways, bright windows, and red and yellow lights, which always smelled like the jasmine incense Little made – and then another, more modest spot in East Cleveland. Little would make her clothes, Womack recalls, and kept her laughing. "He was funny," she says. "He used to kill me trying to dance, and I used to laugh at him because he'd be getting down. He was a fun dude."

After five years of working side by side, Frankie and Johnny closed their shops, and the brothers said goodbye for the last time in 1976, before Johnny moved to Florida. The next three years passed without incident, according to Womack, who continued to live with Frankie in East Cleveland as he played music and worked odd jobs. That is, until the day Womack woke up in bed with the premonition that something was wrong.

"I couldn't understand why he disappeared off the face of the Earth. That was not like him," Womack says now. She says Frankie left everything behind the day he vanished, even his beloved Gibson. "That hurt me for a long time because I really loved him," she says. "That's all I knew. He was my guy, he protected me; I felt safe."

Womack says she didn't report Little missing, as she was young and didn't know what to do. Johnny didn't have his Social Security number and couldn't file an official report. "I think about him a lot," O'Sullivan says, "because we didn't have no time to grow up. That's what I'm missing. When the O'Jays used to come to Cleveland to play, Frankie wasn't with them. We missed all these good times. The O'Jays are still around, but he's not. And that hurts. I don't even listen to them anymore."

IN THE END, it was O'Sullivan who helped crack the cold case, according to Detective Hendershott – but only after years of arduous work and dead ends. Less than two miles from Laurent Corp., Hendershott sits at a long conference table at the Twinsburg Police Department, decades of files spread out before him. He's tall, broad and hirsute, but his voice is young, careful. The fact that he wasn't alive in 1979 when Little went missing is extremely apparent.

Little's case is far from the only murder on the town's books, but it was the only cold case. "It's been bounced around to new detectives," Hendershott, 35, explains. "So, back in 2018, I was brand new to the bureau, and I was given my shot with the case."

He studies the papers in front of him: an *Akron Beacon Journal* article, a photo of a 2009 sketch that was supposed to be a replica of the then-John Doe, an image of a clay 2017 model, and the only photo anyone has of Little, an old high school snap that looks nothing like either. In it, Little is handsome, if unsmiling, with close-cropped hair, dark, strong brows, and sleepy eyes.

There's also a press release from 1982 from the office of the coroner in Akron, Ohio, which tells the macabre tale of how the then-unidentified skull travelled all the way to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., to determine the cause of death. According to Lisa Kohler, the medical examiner for Summit County, since all they had were bones, they needed the expertise of an anthropologist. The anthropologist offered up a host of possibilities of what could have happened to the man, all horrible: he may have suffered blunt trauma, a shotgun blast, dismemberment – the latter almost a certainty given how his body was discovered. According to Hendershott, less than half of the body was found on Cannon Road, and those pieces have stayed, until now, at the Summit County Medical Examiner's Office in the evidence area. The other half is still lost, carried off, perhaps, by animals.

"IT'S PRETTY CRAZY THAT ALL IT TOOK WAS ONE PHONE CALL TO HIS COUSIN," HENDERSHOTT SAYS. "MARGARET IS REALLY THE ONE THAT SOLVED EVERYTHING"

When Hendershott finally got his turn with the case, there had already been a few efforts to identify the body. In 2009, they extracted DNA from the skull's teeth and uploaded it to the FBI's DNA database, CODIS, but no matches were found. In 2017, they partnered with the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation to create the clay model, a photo of which was sent out to the public in hopes that someone would recognise the man. "We'd get calls, but nothing seemed to go anywhere," Hendershott says. "We really didn't have much to start with."

Finally, in 2018, Hendershott heard that police were able to ID and arrest the Golden State Killer using forensic genealogy, and a lightbulb went off. In that case, authorities and genealogy experts were able to use DNA evidence from one of the killer's crime scenes to create a comprehensive DNA profile of the unknown man. They then uploaded that information to an open-source database called GEDMatch, which lets users import raw DNA data and track down family members. When they got a hit on a distant relative, authorities and genealogy experts were able to study the suspect's family tree, finally ID'ing the serial killer, Joseph James DeAngelo, by obtaining a DNA sample from him and matching it to their profile.

To solve his mystery, Hendershott partnered with the DNA Doe Project, a nonprofit that helps ID the dead. The Doe Project created a DNA profile, which it uploaded to GEDMatch and another database called Family Tree DNA. From there, Hendershott was able to build out a family tree, which included several people named Little. After calling a few Littles across the country to no avail, Hendershott finally landed on O'Sullivan, whose son and his wife had used a genealogy site in the past. Hendershott called her in late 2021, and after a brief conversation, discovered that she had a cousin, Frankie, who had been missing for decades. "It's pretty crazy that all it took was one phone call to his cousin," Hendershott says. "Margaret is really the one that solved everything." O'Sullivan introduced the cop to Johnny Little, Frankie's brother, who was able to provide a saliva sample and positively ID Frankie once and for all.

"It was hard to believe at first," Hendershott

LOCAL LEGEND

Frankie Little Jr. was part of the O'Jays in the 60s. Though no photographs of him and the band survive, Little co-wrote 'Oh, How You Hurt Me' and 'Pretty Words'. "He loved playing his instrument, and we loved the way that he played," says lead singer Eddie Levert

says. "There were definitely doubts. I remember making the call to Margaret and coming back to the station and talking to the other detectives and telling them that 'I think we got an ID.' And it was like... that was it. That half was done, but now, the investigation: we got an ID, now we have to figure out what happened to him."

While Hendershott was rifling through the branches of Little's family tree, Little's nephew Shawn Jones was celebrating the Christmas holidays with his relatives in Georgia – the biggest get-together they'd had in years. That all fell apart when they found out, finally, what happened to Frankie. The whole family was confused and upset, especially Johnny.

"That was a total shock. We always wondered where he was, but we had no idea. These detectives, they didn't sweeten it up. They told us exactly what they had found," Johnny says, referring to the condition of Frankie's body.

Sure, the family was relieved, in a way. Frankie hadn't left them. He hadn't deliberately lost touch. But what had happened to him was almost too terrible to bear – murdered, dismembered, tossed aside like trash. Even months later, sitting on the couch of her Cleveland home in her church best – a yellow-and-black striped dress and matching hat – O'Sullivan can't speak about Little without crying.

"Why would someone do him like that?" she asks, her voice getting angry under the tears. "He was a nice guy. He never bothered nobody. You hated Frankie that well, to do something like that? It made me think you don't have a heart to do somebody like that. To cut up somebody like that. Like a chicken."

That's the question that family and authorities are grappling with to this day, because, by all accounts, Little was not the type of man to end up murdered – especially in such a gruesome way. Hendershott says Little had no criminal record to speak of, and he's still stuck on how the man ended up in Twinsburg.

While O'Sullivan says she heard Little was playing shows in the tiny town back in the 70s, both Hendershott and Bonnie Williams, president of the Twinsburg Historical Society, say there's never really been a music scene there. That means Little, who was living in East Cleveland at the time of his disappearance, was likely dumped, which adds another question to the list. "If something is drug- or crime-related, usually someone would just kill someone and leave them there," Hendershott says. "So we're going through different theories about why someone would go through all these steps to bring him here."

Johnny wants the cops to look into a cousin of his who was involved with some shady characters, while Womack told Hendershott about that neighbour – the one Frankie was mad at when he went missing. She says her aunt, who lived down the block, never got a good feeling from the man; Womack can't recall his surname but says she heard he may have murdered his wife or girlfriend a few years after Frankie vanished. Plus, she told Hendershott, he was a Black man in his 50s who drove a dark-coloured station wagon, an eerily similar description to the man Lawrence says he saw back in 1979 dumping the bag containing Frankie's body.

Now, Hendershott is on the hunt for any proof that such a murder took place – and, in turn, for the man who may have committed the crime. Was this the person who vanished Little more than 40 years ago? Could we be this much closer to finding out why Little's life ended so violently – and how his body came to be found in pieces in a distant town? Hendershott isn't sure, but he's hopeful. After all, a year ago the public didn't even know Frankie's name.

FRANKIE ROBINSON HAS an article about his father taped to his cell wall by his bed at Grafton Correctional Institution, where he's been since 2006 for manslaughter – a bar fight gone wrong that he regrets to this day. There, Little can watch over him and Bret, a double doodle that he trains as part of a prison certification programme. He thinks he and his dad look like twins, and he's not wrong – Robinson has that same strong brow as seen in Little's school photo.

Talking about his father, Robinson brings up again and again that Little cared for him – that his life would have been different had he not disappeared. "If my dad was here, I wouldn't be here right now," he laments. "He loved me that much, that he would have made sure I did the right thing."

The father he only knew for a few short years is never far from Robinson's mind. "I dream about him carrying me around. About 'Mockingbird,'" he says about the song his father would sing to him. "That's super glue. It'll never come off my memory. Usually in dreams I see myself smiling at my dad. Just a little baby, looking up at my dad."

ALAMY

Great Stages make for legendary moments

From The Beatles to Beyoncé, Paramore to the Proms – the Royal Albert Hall has played host to some of the world's leading figures in music, dance, sport and politics since it opened its doors in 1871. Today, over 1.7 million visitors enjoy live performances every year, with millions more tuning in online. Just one example of how the UK entertains and inspires audiences from around the world. Join us and see things differently.

GREAT
BRITAIN & NORTHERN IRELAND

Royal Albert Hall

Reviews

Music

ARCTIC JOY RIDE

Their last album saw the four-piece unleash a brand-new sound which divided fans, but in* The Car, *it has been buffed and polished into something more fully formed

Arctic Monkeys

The Car

DOMINO

★★★★½

BEFORE NEWS OF *The Car* fully emerged earlier this year, Arctic Monkeys drummer Matt Helders teased that it "picks up where the other one [2018's *Tranquility Base Hotel & Casino*] left off musically".

"I mean, it's never gonna be like [2013 *AM* single] 'R U Mine?' and all that stuff again, you know, the heavy riffs and stuff," he said. ➔

ILLUSTRATION BY
Michael Dunbabin

True to his word, *The Car* is yet again a world away from the Arctic Monkeys of old. Fans longing for a return to stadium-tailored choruses and catchy riffs after the cosmic lounge rock of *Tranquility Base Hotel & Casino* should look away now. We're even deeper down that rabbit hole and a million miles away from greaser-era Alex Turner, when his leather jacket and slicked-back quiff allowed the four-piece to truly catch transatlantic attention for the first time.

For the rest of us, though, it's a record that builds on the sonic palette of their last, while making things grander, more colourful and cinematic. The result is some of the greatest songs of their career. Recent single 'There'd Better Be a Mirrorball' is a gorgeous heartbreak tale, with Turner's croon telling of a "*heavy heart*" while gorgeous strings amplify the tune.

Elsewhere, 'Sculptures of Anything Goes' sees them experimenting with drum machines and Moog synthesisers to conjure an imposing beat that isn't entirely dissimilar to that which memorably ran through 'Do I Wanna Know'. It's nearly proof that the DNA of Arctic Monkeys remains the same, no matter what the naysayers might think.

In fact, *The Car* allows *Tranquility Base Hotel & Casino* to make more sense four years after its release. Turner addresses the divisive reaction it received as he talks of a "*horrible new sound*" on 'Sculptures of Anything Goes', but their determination to plough on with lounge-pop influences for a second album makes you think that this is where they always needed to be. *Tranquility Base Hotel & Casino*, an undeniable curveball, was clearly no flash in the pan.

One lingering criticism of that album, however, was that it risked neglecting the musicianship of Turner's bandmates, Nick O'Malley, Jamie Cook and drummer Matt Helders. *The Car* goes some way towards correcting that. Tracks such as 'Big Ideas' are so full-bodied and orchestral that you're left wondering why they haven't received the Bond call just yet, while 'Body Paint' feels like the most cohesive and united that the group have been in years.

All this, and then there's the unrivalled ability of Turner's writing to acutely fit a song's mood. He speaks of how his "*teeth are beating and my knees are weak*" on the epic romanticism of 'Body Paint', while a reference to "*the Business they call Show*" on 'Hello You' seems to be Turner cynically turning the camera on his own life. There is also a late Beatles-esque journey into the surreal on stunning, strings-led closer 'Perfect Sense' ("*Richard of York: The Executive Branch/Having some fun with the warm-up act…*").

It all makes for one of their most accomplished and impressive records so far. They may no longer be the same wiry teenage upstarts who emerged from High Green, Sheffield, but why would they be? Seven albums into their career, here is a band comfortable enough to speed off in that titular car, leaving their past creations in the dust as they pursue something new. When the results are as good as this, who can blame them? **NICK REILLY**

COME BACK DOWN TO EARTH

Heroic tales and love songs combine with celestial angels and the cosmos on Christine and the Queens' third album

'Real life is art on the stage… I like what I become when I make something," Chris Letissier said when promoting his hit debut album *Chaleur Humaine* in 2014. The all-singing, all-dancing French artist aka Christine and the Queens finds comfort and purpose in shapeshifting. On *Chaleur Humaine*'s spectacular follow-up, 2018's *Chris*, Letissier explored his gender fluidity and pansexuality more brazenly. Intimate synth-pop was jacked up with muscular late-80s synths and beats that bulged with fun. Letissier's revised alter ego, Chris, celebrated female sexual desire and freedom in a more masculine skin, working to challenge accepted social constructs.

Christine and the Queens

Redcar Les Adorables Étoiles

Because Music

★★★☆☆

Now, he's opened another chapter. *Redcar Les Adorables Étoiles* finds Letissier (who has been living as a man for the past year) employing Christine's male alter ego, Redcar, with heroic tales and love songs steeped sonically in the celestial. It's sung largely in French, but translated song titles ('The Stars', 'Wing Memory') as well as the album name, *The Beginning of Angels*, speak to existential wonder. Tracks are by turns grounded; at others, they spin in a heavenly cosmos. On the ethereal 'La Chanson Du Chevalier' Letissier performs a prayer for a lost knight. It's perhaps narrow-mindedly assumed to be from the perspective of a woman anxiously awaiting her man's return. But anyone can be a knight and a lover; the ambiguity is likely the point.

Much of the album's first half is characterised by vaulted, monastic singing and dark, 80s-influenced pop. It sounds like Letissier has been listening to Kate Bush and Eurythmics. But as beautiful and as striking as his vocals are, tracks such as 'Tu Sais Ce Qu'il Me Faut' and 'Les Étoiles' get lost in orbit. They feel like sketches rather than completed works.

Thankfully, the record picks up in the middle. The synthwave sheen of 'Looking for Love' – a tune apt for a *Drive* sequel – details a search "*for love in a meaningful way*" atop retro-futuristic jitters. 'My Birdman' is gorgeous lounge-pop in which Letissier makes food the vessel of love, crooning sensually over piano and looped samples to "*cook for me*". Like 'Combien De Temps', these earthier numbers bring variety and best show off Letissier's reinvention. Otherwise, too much of it fails to capture his usual magic. **CHARLOTTE KROL**

Cavetown

Worm Food

SIRE RECORDS

★★★½☆

All grown up and ready to rock

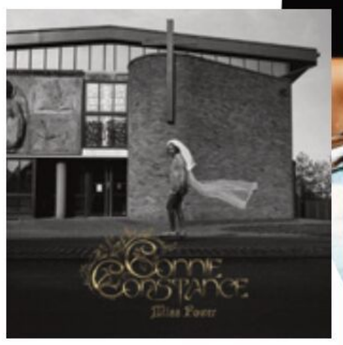
SINCE EMERGING IN THE LATE 2010S aged just 16, Cavetown — aka Robin Skinner — has developed a remarkably large community through his nakedly honest bedroom-pop songs. Over a series of further releases and 2020 major label debut *Sleepyhead*, his sound has slowly expanded and become more defined.

On new album *Worm Food*, the now 23-year-old stares adulthood in the face and grows up, both musically and in terms of his lyricism. "*I'm tryna love the person I was when I was born/Hating on a kid doesn't serve me anymore*," he sings on lead single '1994', a superbly catchy tune that recalls the bedroom intimacy of Clairo, occasionally adding splashes of distorted guitar in the realm of his recent collaborator, Beabadoobee, who appears on the record's track 'Fall in Love With a Girl'.

Elsewhere, 'Kiss U' pushes him closer to pop through thudding beats and manipulated vocals, while Chloe Moriondo collaboration 'Grey Space' starts with twinkling synths before ending up in an avalanche of guitars. Here, and occasionally elsewhere on *Worm Food*, he emerges from his bedroom-pop beginnings and hints at a future as an emo rocker.

In a statement about his video for '1994', Cavetown said that, "instead of rejecting adulthood, I'm getting ready to let go of childhood". On *Worm Food*, he makes firm steps in that direction through openness and honesty. With a vast audience in tow who have grown up alongside him, Skinner and his audience are making brave and bold steps together into maturity.

WILL RICHARDS



Connie Constance

Miss Power

PIAS

★★★★☆

ACROSS CONNIE Constance's second album *Miss Power*, the Watford-based singer is many things. Hell, even in its first 10 minutes she cries out to defy categorisation. On opening track 'In the Beginning', she presents herself as a delicate soul singer, before second song and recent single 'Till the World's Awake' explodes in synth-pop joy and repositions her as a pop star. Its title track then comes around in lightning-quick time and suddenly she's singing vigorously over fast and furious indie music.

Constance has been labelled a rock star by many, and if the tag can be seen as true, it's through her energy and revolutionary spirit more than the music itself. Elsewhere on *Miss Power*, she presents tender acoustic bliss ('Never Get to Love You', 'Heavyweight Champion'), widescreen pop ('Hurt You'), frantic yelps of unhinged punk ('Kamikaze') and conversational lyricism ('YUCK!').

On 'Till The World's Awake', the album's standout, Constance sends a love letter to marginalised communities across the UK, and commends their resilience "no matter how much the world we live in tries to distract us from our power", she said in a video about it. The sheer joy with which it's transmitted on the ecstatic pop song shows the artist as one who knows how to connect deeply and honestly with an audience while having a ball along the way.

Genre-mashing is common of this new breed of songwriters, and it can succeed or fail because of the person presenting it. *Miss Power* works because of Constance's independent spirit, righteous feminist politics and the passion with which she attacks each of the songs, whether it's with a delicate whisper or hellbound scream. **WILL RICHARDS**

Louis Tomlinson

Faith in the Future

BMG

★★★☆☆

ON HIS second solo album, Louis Tomlinson delivers an earnest love letter to indie-pop and guitar rock, which, the former One Direction star has always professed, are his first loves.

On opening track 'The Greatest', he deploys hard-hitting Kasabian-esque beats, while 'Bigger Than Me' shows him experimenting with choruses tailor-made for the rooms he's now capable of playing on his own (an O2 Arena show is on the cards next year).

Elsewhere, 'Face the Music' shows more depth than the first record as he reflects on how "*good and bad and right and wrong are stories made up when we are young to scare us*". A late highlight also comes in 'Common People', which sees Tomlinson – now 30 – taking stock of his remarkable journey in music over the past 12 years. "*When I get lost, I go back to where I started*," is his earnest croon.

The record might be slightly on the long side at 16 tracks, which, it should be said, don't all land with the same degree of success, but it's an admirable attempt at widening the boundaries of his sound as he continues his second decade in music. Fans will lap it up. **NICK REILLY**

CHRISTINE AND THE QUEENS: PIERRE ANGE CARLOTTI

We have lift-off

Sam Ryder

There's Nothing but Space, Man!

PARLOPHONE

★★★☆☆

WHEN SAM RYDER finished in second place for the UK at Eurovision earlier this year, his runner-up status felt like a huge victory. Here was a talent we could finally be proud of — and one with a fighting chance of launching their own career post Eurovision.

The first true test of this comes in Ryder's debut album, which shows off the impressive vocals that first catapulted him to the attention of Justin Bieber and Alicia Keys on TikTok, and then wowed the continent in May. To Ryder's credit, it's a record that sees him going all out to prove he's no one-trick pony. Tracks such as 'Tiny Riot' show off radio-friendly alt-rock, while the likes of 'Whirlwind' and 'Crashing Down' display a more stripped-back side to his oft-bombastic sound.

It doesn't always land, as shown in the positivity-by-numbers of lead single 'Somebody', while 'This Time' feels like a misjudged detour into Michael Bublé territory. For the most part, however, it's a perfectly serviceable showcase of the impressive pipes that allowed the UK to claw back a bit of dignity on the European stage. No nil points to be seen here. **NICK REILLY**

Paul Mescal and Frankie Corio as father and daughter in *Aftersun*

Film

WISH YOU WERE HERE

Paul Mescal shines in this touching tale about a daughter, now a grown woman, looking back on the last holiday she took with her dad

Aftersun

STARRING Paul Mescal, Frankie Corio, Celia Rowlson-Hall

DIRECTED BY Charlotte Wells

★★★★☆

NORMAL People's Paul Mescal stars in this acclaimed drama set on a package holiday in the 90s. He plays Calum, a young Scottish divorcee who goes away with his 11-year-old daughter, Sophie (Frankie Corio). The setting is sunny Turkey, in a cheap, dilapidated resort with nightly entertainment from the perpetually cheerful tour reps. The pair try to fill their days as best they can, lounging around in hotels, shisha cafés and pool tables, where Sophie's prowess gains her respect from older kids and teens. As she gets a peek into their more hormonal world, she also observes her father's changing moods, and a growing sense of uncertainty creeps into the film.

It's a thoroughly absorbing drama that's framed as memories from the older Sophie, who's looking back on a time that may seem more significant to her now. While there is tension and a mysterious air of potential danger, there are also charming and funny moments of father-daughter bonding – you can really believe that this pair are related to one another with their lively and affectionate banter, as well as their moments of awkwardness. There's a feeling of them being thrown together in difficult circumstances where they're both trying to have fun, but not always succeeding: something many viewers will likely relate to, whether they are single parents or remembering their own childhoods.

Aftersun is rich in visual detail and invites you to observe and guess at its characters' thoughts and motivations without spelling anything out. Sophie witnesses fragments of phone conversations, and also records footage with her father on a miniDV camera, adding to the idea of memory and nostalgia. Newcomer Corio is a find, and Mescal is excellent as the kind, fun, well-meaning father who seems to be struggling with life, but is full of love for his daughter.

It's a very impressive debut from Scottish writer-director Charlotte Wells, who delivers a tangible atmosphere loaded with nostalgia and a wistful air. She's been winning big on the film-festival circuit, receiving awards in Cannes, Deauville, Munich, Sarajevo and Bucharest, and looks set to be a contender for the film awards season – certainly the BAFTAs if not the Oscars, who often have a blind spot for great British indies.

Wells has said the film is a fiction, so it isn't strictly autobiographical, but it is inspired by some of her own memories. That helps to give the film a vivid sense of time, place and emotion: you may come out of this film feeling deeply emotional, but not knowing exactly why.

Despite some sad moments, the overall tone is hypnotic rather than downbeat, helped by a cracking 80s/90s soundtrack, featuring everything from The Lightning Seeds to Catatonia to Deacon Blue. Brace yourself, however, for a very painful karaoke scene, as well as the use of the gratingly authentic Steps song '5, 6, 7, 8'. Some things are better best forgotten. *18 NOVEMBER*

ANNA SMITH

AFTERSUN: COURTESY OF A24, *ROALD DAHL'S MATILDA THE MUSICAL*: SONY, *ARMAGEDDON TIME*: COURTESY OF FOCUS FEATURES, *LIVING*: SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

Lashana Lynch and Alisha Weir in *Matilda the Musical*

CLASS OF HER OWN

Roald Dahl's Matilda the Musical

STARRING
Alisha Weir, Emma Thompson, Andrea Riseborough, Stephen Graham

DIRECTED BY
Matthew Warchus

★★★★☆

TIM MINCHIN AND DENNIS KELLY'S MUSICAL has been a smash hit around the world, and this big-screen adaptation works remarkably well. Directed by Matthew Warchus (*Pride*), it stars newcomer Alisha Weir as Matilda, the child of brash, uncaring parents (a hilarious Andrea Riseborough and Stephen Graham). Matilda is precociously brilliant, so when she finally gets her wish of attending school, she runs rings around the angry headmistress, Miss Trunchbull (Emma Thompson, more scary than funny). Meanwhile she bonds with her lovely teacher, Miss Honey (Lashana Lynch) and helps out some of the other kids at school.

It's a fun, playful story of a child who rises above her circumstances, and if you haven't read the Roald Dahl book or seen the previous Matilda movie, you might be in for some surprises. The singing and dancing ranges from bouncily energetic to unexpectedly poignant. Bond star Lashana Lynch continues to prove her versatility with a gentle, heart-warming and ultimately tear-jerking turn as Miss Honey. *Roald Dahl's Matilda the Musical* is not necessarily a film for everyone, but if you don't like squeaky children or musicals you'll probably steer clear anyway. I enjoyed it.

25 NOVEMBER **ANNA SMITH**

ALL THINGS UNEQUAL

Armageddon Time

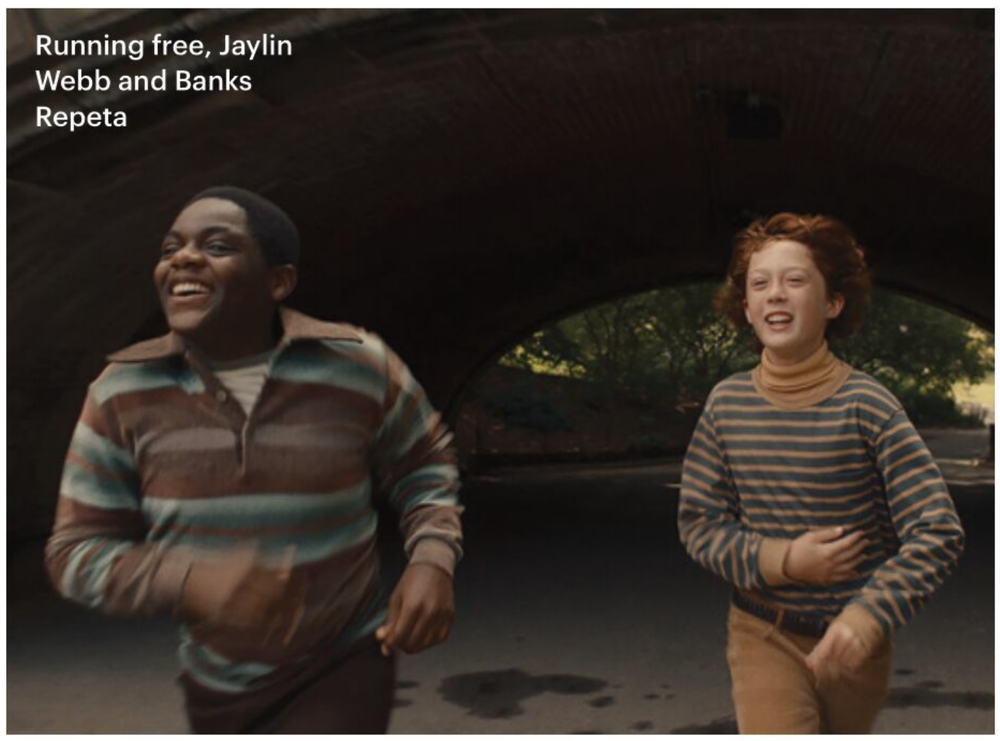
STARRING
Anne Hathaway, Jeremy Strong, Anthony Hopkins, Banks Repeta, Jaylin Webb

DIRECTED BY
James Gray

★★★☆☆

FILMMAKER JAMES GRAY HAS MADE SOME wonderful movies, from *The Yards* to *The Lost City of Z*. This one's inspired by his memories of living in Queens, New York, in the 80s. Child star Banks Repeta takes the lead as Paul Graff, a white Jewish kid who befriends a Black classmate called Johnny (Jaylin Webb). The pair enjoy a charming, mischievous friendship that comes under threat. Meanwhile Paul's father Irving (*Succession's* Jeremy Strong) beats him when he gets into trouble, much to the consternation of his caring mother Esther (a miscast Anne Hathaway).

This story of domestic and scholarly dramas takes on a political tone as the election approaches: Reagan is running, and we all know how that's going to go down. But this is from a child's point of view, and Paul doesn't fully understand either the political scene or the racial tension in society. Fortunately, his wise grandfather is on hand to advise. And luckily, that grandfather is played by Anthony Hopkins, who's so good you don't care that he's doing the same accent again. The scenes between the pair are the film's highlight: otherwise it's thought-provoking, but a little too safe and sentimental to really pack a punch. *18 NOVEMBER* **ANNA SMITH**



Running free, Jaylin Webb and Banks Repeta

All change for Bill Nighy

SEIZE THE MOMENT

Living

STARRING
Bill Nighy, Aimee Lou Wood, Tom Burke

DIRECTED BY
Oliver Hermanus

★★★★☆

BILL NIGHY DOES GREAT BILL NIGHY in this touching drama about a humble, buttoned-up widower who discovers he has a terminal illness. Keeping the information to himself, the news leads to him leaving the 9-5 grind in an effort to inject some fun into what life he has left. Set in 50s London, it's a classy period piece with highbrow origins: it's based on the 1952 film *Ikiru* by Akira Kurosawa, itself inspired by Leo Tolstoy's 1886 novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Although no masterpiece, it's a quietly affecting meditation on the meaning of life, with a strong supporting cast including Aimee Lou Wood and Tom Burke.

OUT NOW **ANNA SMITH**

Lyrics, Camera, Action

For some people, being a pop star just isn't enough. There's a long tradition of British musicians making a move into movies. As Harry Styles becomes the latest UK singer to turn his attention to the big screen, Rolling Stone UK looks at the stars who went from the BRITs to the flicks...

BY MARK SUTHERLAND

ALAMY, PRIME VIDEO

Harry Styles

Starring with Danny DeVito in the 'Steal My Girl' video is the closest most of One Direction have got to Hollywood superstardom, but Styles has become catnip for casting directors. He's played a luxuriantly coiffed squaddie in *Dunkirk*, made Marvel fanboys drop their popcorn in an *Eternals* end-credits scene and caused a stir on screen and off in *Don't Worry Darling*. Now Academy Award buzz is building around his new film, *My Policeman* (out now on Prime Video) — proof that Styles' acting career is only going in one direction: up.

Cynthia Erivo

She's been making records since 2014, but south Londoner Erivo's acting credits have rapidly outpaced her output as a singer. She's already won an Emmy, a Grammy and a Tony, and been nominated for two Oscars thanks to gritty roles in the likes of *Harriet* and *Bad Times at the El Royale*. Next up: featuring in the long-awaited movie versions of both *Luther* and *Wicked*. Now that's what you call range.

David Bowie

The musical chameleon was resolutely resistant to typecasting in his hit-and-miss acting career. After making his big-screen debut as an alien in the highly acclaimed *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, he then starred as everything from a principled prisoner of war (*Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence*) to Pontius Pilate (*The Last Temptation of Christ*). Oddly, though, his most enduring part was as *Labyrinth*'s goblin king — surely the movie equivalent of 'The Laughing Gnome' being his biggest hit...

AWARD Marianne Faithfull in *Irina Palm*

Mick Jagger and Anita Pallenberg in *Performance*

David Bowie

Cynthia Erivo

Mick Jagger

Jagger's movie career started strongly, with an eye-catching turn as a reclusive rock star in Nicolas Roeg's 1970 cult hit *Performance*. After starring as Aussie outlaw Ned Kelly in the film of the same name, he declared his intention to "concentrate on being a character actor", but the roles grew sparse until he starred as a futuristic bounty hunter in 1992's *Freejack*. He later found more satisfaction as a producer with his own company Jagged Films.

Marianne Faithfull

Faithfull missed out on co-starring with Jagger in *Ned Kelly* after an apparent drugs overdose, but her acting CV has since outshone that of her former beau. Her early work was often controversial — she was one of the first people to say "fuck" in a mainstream movie in 1967's *I'll Never Forget What's'isname*. But nowadays she's much more respectable, getting a Best Actress nomination at the European Film Awards for her role in 2007's *Irina Palm*. Eat your heart out, Mick.

The Beatles

As with most things, The Beatles pretty much invented British musicians starring in films. Certainly, *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!* pioneered the idea of bands appearing as fictionalised versions of themselves. Then, mimicking their musical progression, later projects such as *Magical Mystery Tour* and the animated landmark *Yellow Submarine* became distinctly more psychedelic. Ringo Starr went on to appear in several, mostly terrible post-Beatles movies, while George Harrison became a successful movie producer. It's always the quiet ones.

Lulu

In Sidney Poitier's 1967 education drama *To Sir, with Love*, Lulu played big-hearted, big-earringed pupil Babs, who makes Poitier cry with her rendition of the film's theme tune. The song went all the way to number one in America but, surprisingly, her film career did not follow suit. Instead, Lulu stuck to occasional small roles before playing a version of herself in *Absolutely Fabulous: The Movie*. For some people, school days really *are* the best days of your life.

Rita Ora

"This is London, baby!" declared Rita Ora in a cringey cameo as she started a street race in *Fast & Furious 6*. But, despite that somewhat inauspicious debut, Hollywood soon came calling. She's since played Christian Grey's sister Mia in the blockbusting *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise and a gender-flipped Artful Dodger in *Twist*. There's likely more to come, too, now she's married to *Thor: Ragnarok* director Taika Waititi.

Billie Piper

Piper effortlessly graduated from starring in a *Smash Hits* TV advert to making irresistible teenpop anthems, and her shift to the small screen was similarly smooth. After a host of TV roles in the likes of *Doctor Who* and *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, she hit movie paydirt as a single mum alongside David Thewlis and Lily James in *Rare Beasts*. The highly acclaimed film was also her directorial debut. With her current leading role in *Catherine Called Birdy* (out now on Prime Video) it looks like the pop comeback will have to wait a while...

Dua Lipa

After honing her green-screen skills in those glamorous videos, the UK's pop princess will make her film debut in *Argylle*, due next year. Not much is known about the projected new franchise, except that Matthew Vaughn (*Kick-Ass*, *Kingsman*) is directing, and Lipa is giving some serious Bond girl energy in the stills released so far. With Dua on board, you can expect a spy film with new rules... ®

DOUBLE TAKE (From top) Lulu's music career eclipsed her early acting roles; Billie Piper — seen here as Lady Aislinn in *Catherine Called Birdy* — enjoyed early chart success before turning her hand to acting and now directing; the triple Grammy-award-winning Dua Lipa in stills from the upcoming *Argylle*

WHICH OTHER ACTING MUSICIANS DESERVE AN OSCAR?

AND WHO SHOULD JUST FOXTROT OSCAR BACK TO ROCK'N'ROLL?

Damon Albarn is a cocky geezer who gets out of his depth with some proper working-class hardmen... No, it's not *Blur vs Oasis: The Movie*, but *Face*, his proto-*Lock, Stock* 1997 acting debut. But Albarn wouldn't be the first — or the last — musician to, erm, blur the lines between his musical and acting personas.

David Essex forged a decent second career playing twinkly eyed rogues in films such as *That'll Be the Day*, *Stardust* and *Silver Dream Racer*. **Clare Grogan**, winsome frontwoman of 80s pop sensations Altered Images, made an equally charming foil for John Gordon Sinclair in coming-of-age classic *Gregory's Girl*. So Solid Crew's **Ashley Walters** (aka Asher D, pictured) brought some grit to the likes of *Bullet Boy* and *Anuvahood*, while **Skepta** added edge to *Anti-Social*, alongside future royal Meghan Markle, no less.

Others prefer to play against type. After starring in The Who's own *Tommy*, **Roger Daltrey** cut his hair to play an armed robber in *McVicar*, while few Bros fans would have anticipated **Luke Goss**' reinvention as a bad guy in films like *Blade II* and *Hellboy II*. However, not even that can compare to Spandau Ballet's distinctly unthreatening **Martin and Gary Kemp** being cast as notorious gangsters Ronnie and Reggie in *The Krays*...

Pop stars from **Patsy Kensit** to **Leona Lewis**, **Paloma Faith** and Girls Aloud's **Sarah Harding** have all given acting a go, with varying success. That must be why — after the Spice Girls band vehicle, 1997's *Spice World* — Scary Spice **Mel B** played the best friend role in sappy romcom *The Seat Filler*. Or why **Ed Sheeran** appeared as himself in both *Bridget Jones's Baby* and *Yesterday*, in which he memorably argued for The Beatles' classic 'Hey Jude' to change its title to 'Hey Dude'. At least he made an impression. Whereas not even the stunt casting of The Libertines' **Pete Doherty** opposite Charlotte Gainsbourg could rescue French flick *Confession of a Child of the Century* from box-office ignominy. It became America's lowest-grossing film of 2015. Proof that pop and popcorn don't always go together...

ALAMY, PRIME VIDEO

CDLP.COM

CDLP

TECH

SMART SOLUTIONS FOR MODERN LIVING

WORDS AND EDIT
DECLAN MCGLYNN

A NEW LOW

Sonos Sub Mini brings wireless bass to your setup

Sonos's latest addition to their high-quality, wireless, feature-heavy speakers is a brand-new subwoofer. The Sonos Sub Mini has been created to fit in neatly and stylishly next to your existing soundbar — Beam or Ray are both supported — or music-listening unit like the One, One SL and SYMFONISK, to add some neighbour-friendly oomph to your music and movie experience.

Although the Sub Mini isn't quite as small as its name suggests, its singular design means it's slick enough to go unnoticed tucked alongside your TV stand or bookshelf. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that there's no visible speaker — the two six-inch woofers, powered by two class-D amps, are encased in a subtle slot — but they're anything but low-key once the bass kicks in.

If you own some Sonos kit, you'll be well aware of how simple it is to set up, and the Sub Mini is no different. A single power cable makes up the contents of the box — the unit's audio is fully wireless. Once it's switched on, it'll connect to your WiFi using the Bluetooth on your phone, find other speakers, pair up and you're ready to go.

The sound is — despite the name — huge. Some subwoofers have the tendency to announce themselves drastically, so you know they're there, but actually, the best subs offer a layer of low frequency that you barely notice until it's gone. That's not to say it's too quiet, more that it's non-invasive, and complements the already well-tuned Beam version two we tested it with. If it does feel too much, or too little, you can adjust the sub's volume in the app. It also works with Sonos's Trueplay tuning system so you can achieve the perfect pitch for your personal space.

Overall, it looks good, sounds great, and it slots into an already well-oiled Sonos ecosystem beautifully. The Sub Mini comes in at £429.

SONOS.COM

SPOTIFY ADDS AUDIOBOOKS

The green giant continues to diversify its audio offerings

Streaming giants Spotify have announced that they're adding audiobooks to their platform. The news comes off the back of a push to podcasts in recent years, with high-profile exclusive shows dominating their interface over the past 12 months. Soon, users will be able to buy books directly on the app, the biggest threat to Amazon Audible's dominance in years. It's also interesting to note that Spotify will be selling books as a one-off purchase, rather than as part of a free, ad-supported or premium subs model, at least at first. Spotify say there are 300,000 audiobooks available at launch, which is US-only for now.

SPOTIFY.COM

THE BEST IPHONE YET?

Apple's latest sharpens up the classic range

Apple's iPhone has done more to revolutionise communication than any other device since the dawn of the internet. But 14 models later, what more can the tech giant really do to continually reinvent what is already a well-oiled OS and hardware pairing?

As usual, it starts with the camera, which now boasts 48 megapixels for "mind-blowing detail" in both the 6.1-inch standard and 6.7-inch Plus options. The other most obvious upgrade is the always-on screen, which, as you might have guessed, stays lit up even when at rest so that iOS16's new lock-screen widgets remain visible.

The much-maligned notch has been replaced by the 'dynamic island', making use of the black oval that surrounds the front camera and sensor by integrating it into animated notifications and other functions like calls and controlling music. The battery life is purportedly much improved too and a swathe of new colours are now on offer, including a slick Deep Purple. It costs £849 for the 6.1-inch display and £949 for the 6.7-inch version.

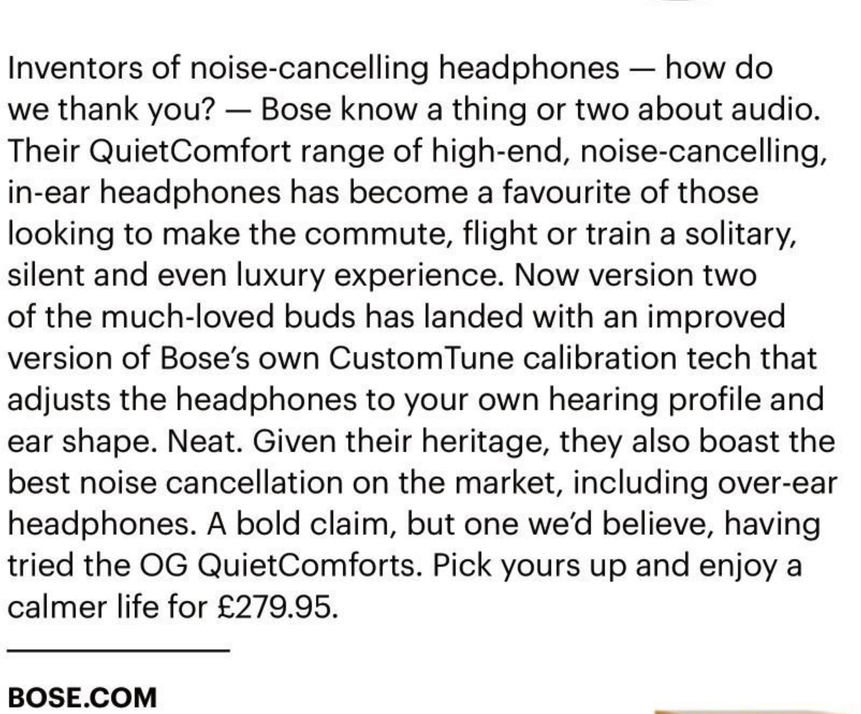
APPLE.COM

THE COLOUR AND THE SHAPE

Upgrade your vinyl setup with Pro-Ject's latest bundle

Pro-Ject are one of the most famous names in home turntables, not just because of their distinctive, minimal design, but because their high-quality sound and impeccable reputation. Now they're launching Colour Audio System which offers everything you need to equip your flat, house or office with the joys of vinyl. Including an amp, turntable speakers, the bundle comes with the cabling required to get up and special isolation feet to reduce vibrations. And if vinyl wasn't cool enough, Colour Audio System splashes the colourway across the speakers, amp turntable. There are five colours on — pick it up for £1,599 all in.

PROJECT-AUDIO.COM



A QUIET LIFE

Bose's QuietComfort IIs add even better noise cancellation

Inventors of noise-cancelling headphones — how do we thank you? — Bose know a thing or two about audio. Their QuietComfort range of high-end, noise-cancelling, in-ear headphones has become a favourite of those looking to make the commute, flight or train a solitary, silent and even luxury experience. Now version two of the much-loved buds has landed with an improved version of Bose's own CustomTune calibration tech that adjusts the headphones to your own hearing profile and ear shape. Neat. Given their heritage, they also boast the best noise cancellation on the market, including over-ear headphones. A bold claim, but one we'd believe, having tried the OG QuietComforts. Pick yours up and enjoy a calmer life for £279.95.

BOSE.COM

Aston Martin DBS

RS ROAD TEST

Sometimes a car is more than the sum of its parts, and this one — however accomplished its components — is one of those. Aston Martin's DBS is beautiful, beguiling and every bit as naughty as it is nice

Wherever Daniel Craig is right now, whatever he's doing, and however pleased he might be about having so neatly wrapped up his stint as Britain's favourite silver-screen secret agent, there will be one itch he can no longer scratch. Because, like anyone who has left a job, he leaves behind his company car. And, in the case of one James Bond, that meant handing back the keys to an Aston Martin.

That would be sufficient to trouble anyone with petrol in their veins, let alone 007, who — over decades — has become synonymous with a number of cars that were as straight up beautiful as they were cleverly modified. From Sean Connery's sensationally slippery DB5 that debuted in *Goldfinger* to the unique DB10 created specifically for Craig's *Spectre*, a clutch of coupés became inexorably and indelibly linked with the most stylish of spies.

But not one of them was the car pictured here — the

Aston Martin DBS. And that's a shame. For had this flagship, front-engined hyper-GT been at the beck and call of Mr Bond, then he might well (spoiler alert) still be alive today. Because if you need to run away from those intent on doing harm, to you or to the wider world, then — surely — you want the hardest, fastest, meanest Aston there is? Especially when it's also — to these eyes anyway — the best-looking of all.

The DBS is unmistakably Aston Martin, from the marque-defining grille through to the distinctive long-bonnet, short-cabin silhouette, but it's lower, wider and more aggressive than anything its maker has conceived before. The brand hallmarks of beauty and proportion are present and correct, but the body form is pulled taut around the car's frame and a series of scoops, ducts and slashes suggest everything superfluous has been carved away.

And that which remains is as likely formed by onrushing air as human hand, for this car is supremely quick by any measure. The 5.2-litre, twin-turbo V12 powerplant pumps out a vast 715bhp, which means the DBS will fling itself from standstill to 60mph in just 3.4 seconds and then on to well beyond 200mph. And while there are other cars that can do that or similar, there are none that sound like this does in the process.

QUICK STATS

POWER
715BHP
TORQUE
900NM
0-60MPH
3.4SECS
TOP SPEED
211MPH
CO_2
306G/KM
PRICE
£238,725

It's not just volume, though it isn't shy of leaving an audible clue as to the extent of the underbonnet machinations, but the visceral nature of the heady combination of forward thrust and rearward exhaust howl is straight from the Hollywood sound-effect box. It's emotive, it's thrilling and occasionally very naughty indeed and confers childlike glee in everyone who sees and hears it. And that's as much fun for adults as it is for kids.

That's not to suggest the DBS isn't capable of comfortable, long-legged, cross-continent touring — it absolutely is. The interior is a haven of beautifully finished leather, suede-effect Alcantara and lashings of carbon-fibre: it's a beautiful place in which to sit and watch the world come at you, however quickly. And with variable, configurable powertrain and suspension settings that range from GT (supple and comfortable) to Sport (firmer and tauter) and Sport Plus (hard and very, very fast), there's a commendable bandwidth in the range of moods for all.

But for those who want a supercar that — when it isn't cosseting and comforting — appeals to base emotions, this is it. To look at, to sit in, to ride and drive, to hear or to have and to hold, the Aston Martin DBS is a thing of beauty. One day, soon, when they don't make them like they used to, we'll look back and lament the passing of a car predicated on engaging a set of emotions just for the hell of it. On such days, the world really won't be enough.

DARREN STYLES

ASTONMARTIN.COM

STYLE

WHAT WE WANT AND WHAT WE NEED

WORDS AND EDIT
JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

Designs on the streets

Two powerhouses of youth culture, Palace and Gucci, have come together to create a hybrid British-Italian collection that's fusing streetwear with fashion, tapping into pop-culture influences ranging from football and the rodeo to house music and motor-biking. The power of the logo is evident in the Palace x Gucci capsule, which mixes the Gucci 'G' with the Palace 'Tri-Ferg' in favourites from both labels, including football tees, denim, tracksuits and the classic Gucci horsebit loafer. By featuring plenty of pops and nuances that helped build both brands' cult followings, Palace Gucci has found the sweet spot.

Palace Gucci is available through Gucci's online concept store, Gucci Vault, which will also take pop-up form at Palace's London store.
vault.gucci.com

Trendsetter

ES Magazine's editor-in-chief and style guru, Ben Cobb, has created a sleek collection with Tiger of Sweden, inspired by his renowned wardrobe. The eight-piece collection, exclusive to MATCHESFASHION, mixes the brand's rich heritage with Cobb's 70s aesthetic and includes a single-breasted peak lapel suit, flared trouser suit and block-colour shirts as well as beautiful, belted overcoats and dress coats.
matchesfashion.com

See the light

Luxury luggage brand Rimowa are expanding their space-exploration theme — they already have models named Mars, Mercury and Moon — with their new Original Cabin Aurora Borealis case. The pattern channels the ethereal greens and violets of the northern lights against a backdrop of black aluminium and green seals to give your suitcase star power when you're trying to locate it among the dull cases on the luggage carousel (or private jet). Unlike the stars in the expanding universe, there aren't an infinite number of these, with Rimowa releasing a limited-edition, 1000-piece run.
Original Aurora Borealis case is available at Rimowa stores and rimowa.com

Diamonds are forever

The Christian Dior CD Diamond design, first unveiled in 1974, has been reinterpreted for the modern era, with the new pattern decorating bags as well as trainers. Find the latest collection at The Fabulous World of Dior in Harrods, a Dior micro village that includes two pop-ups, a café and an immersive exhibition as well as the luxury brand's clothes, accessories, beauty products, fragrance and homeware. Breakfast at Tiffany's is out... but lunch at The Fabulous World of Dior at Harrods is most definitely in. *dior.com*

One directional

Mytheresa and Marni are getting their Harry Styles on with their gorgeous exclusive capsule. Using a bold colour palette of blues, purples, oranges and yellows, the 21-piece collection includes crew-neck jumpers, cardigans, vests, mohair knitwear and beanie hats. These can be mixed and matched to create an eclectic aesthetic on your top half that will be perfectly counterbalanced by some cotton gabardine cargo trousers. *mytheresa.com*

Spanish allure

Swedish brand Acne Studios has chosen Spanish superstar Rosalía to headline their Autumn 2022 campaign. She has been photographed by Dutch artist Paul Kooiker in a series of intimate still and moving images that reimagine the singer as a historical muse. Rosalía wears manipulated and repurposed denim, jersey and leather that display Acne's signature experimentation with processes and fabrics. There are plenty of tactile textures, including fringing teamed with oversized fits, and intricate, embellished accessories. It is, quite frankly, *fantástico*. *acnestudios.com*

SPOTLIGHT

BY
JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

Smile!

The iconic smiley face has become a symbol of happiness and positivity. To celebrate the most famous image turning 50, A|X Armani Exchange and SmileyWorld® have launched a special collaboration. Armani Exchange have created two designs, the first replacing the eyes with the A|X lettering, and the second referencing Giorgio Armani's recognisable glasses and smile. All-over smiley prints make their way onto casual outerwear, hats and other accessories, while SmileyWorld® patches have been applied to everything from sweatshirts and T-shirts to socks, trainers and backpacks so you spread a little happiness when wearing them.

The collection will be available at the newly opened Armani Exchange store on London's Regent street.

armaniexchange.com

LUXURY ACCESSORIES

BY
JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

Frames of the forest

Eyewear brand Moscot are giving one of their most popular spectacles a verdant spin. They have created a limited-edition, 300-piece run of their Lemtosh frames in a pine-green hue that lends them a super stylish retro feel. The optical design (£355) and the sunglasses (£375) are only available online, so flex those fingers fast to make others green with envy.
moscot.com

FAVOURITE THINGS

Ted Baker crystal light pink sunglasses, £75
tedbaker.com

Salvatore Ferragamo sunglasses, £249.90
ferragamo.com

Swarovski eyewear, £400
swarovski.com

RollingStone UK

WE'VE GOT YOUR GIFT GAME WRAPPED

Make it a cool yule with presents that are sure to please this Christmas season

Beats Studio Buds
Wireless noise-cancelling Studio Buds in six colours, including Ocean Blue, Moon Grey and Sunset Pink.
£159.99
beatsbydre.com

Smart Snow Cone Machine
Mr Frosty has had a glow-up, with this yassified snow-cone maker that taps right into our 90s nostalgia.
£65
selfridges.com

Ben Sherman Jacquard sweater
A contemporary classic to keep you stylishly snug all winter long.
£80
bensherman.com

Elemis Pro-Collagen Skincare Stories Gift Set
Five carefully curated anti-ageing products that deeply cleanse, hydrate and smooth the skin.
£230
uk.elemis.com

Jimmy Choo Bryer flat boots
For when you have a country walk at 3pm, but an all-night warehouse party to attend at 3am...
£850
jimmychoo.com

THOMAS SABO Elements of Nature watch

Inspired by the elements and their respective zodiac signs, THOMAS SABO's latest watches are expertly and elaborately crafted.

Silver £298

Black £339

thomassabo.com

Dsquared2 One Life bucket hat

Dsquared2's latest collection continues the brand's mission to be eco-conscious when producing their clothes.

£205

dsquared2.com

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II

The classic continues, with a prequel to the franchise's 2019 edition, with the return of Captain John.

from £69.99

playstation.com

Fujifilm Instax Mini Link 2 smartphone printer

Includes instaAiR that turns your printer into a tool to apply effects such as petals, neon and glitter to your pics.

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eshop.fujifilm-x.com

Positive Grid Spark MINI
A portable, battery-operated Bluetooth speaker and guitar amp that lets you play music anywhere.
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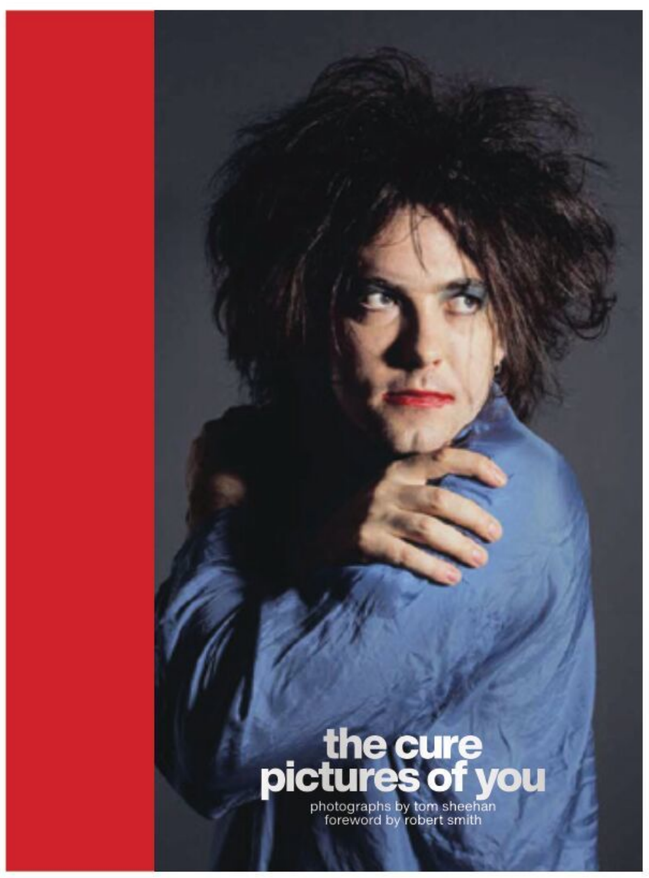
positivegrid.com/spark-mini
Positive Grid
Positive Grid

Aries Varsity jacket

Collegiate core is back, with the likes of *Euphoria, Gossip Girl* — and this cool jacket.

£1,435

ariesarise.com



The Cure — Pictures of You

A retrospective of images of The Cure spanning three decades, photographed by Tom Sheehan.

£30

waterstones.com

CASETiFY colour cloud iPhone case

A Gen-Z dreamy colour palette to encase your phone like a hyper-pop album-cover cloud.

£41

harveynichols.com

Sonos Ray Soundbar

This super-compact soundbar upgrades the sound for your TV, music and gaming experience.

£279

sonos.com

JL Coquet Rolling Stones boxset

Dinner plates with Mick Jagger's effigy on them? What's not to love?

€750

jlcoquet.com

Pioneer DJ PLX-500 Direct Drive Turntable

A professional turntable that's perfect for beginners.

£349

pioneerdj.com

Fila Gold Maffei velour track jacket

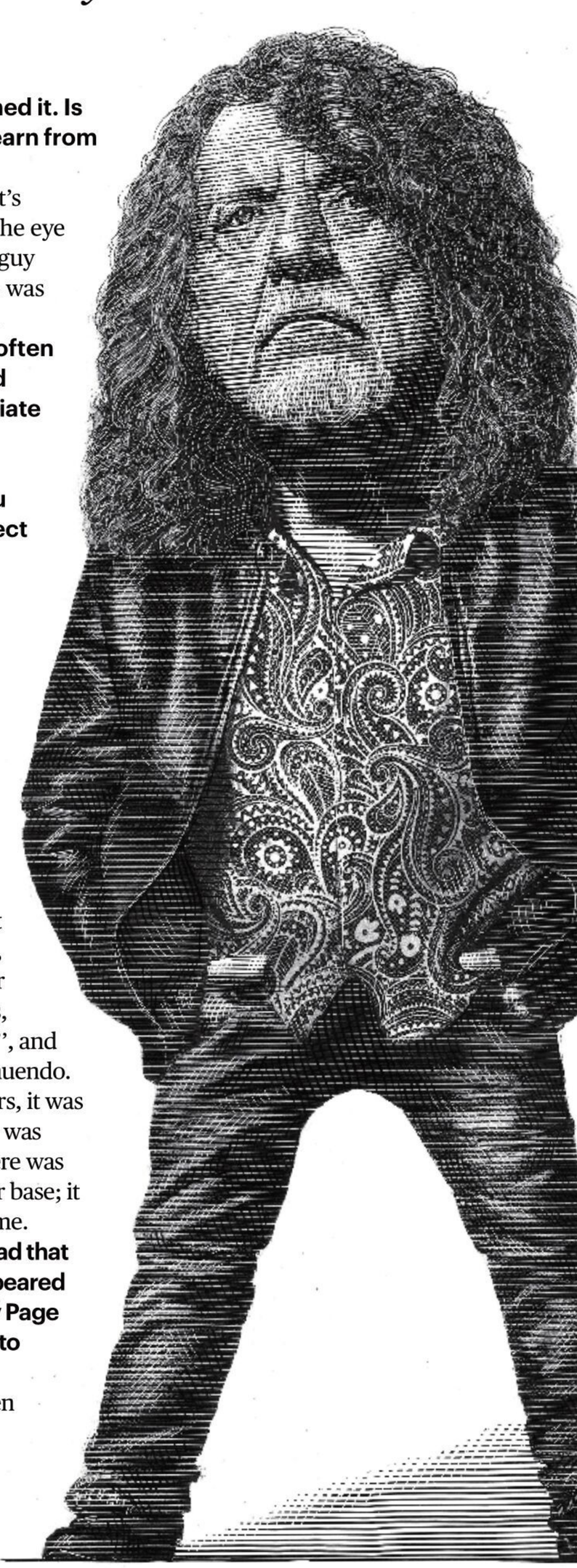
Supersoft, and straight out of a Wes Anderson movie, this velour jacket makes you feel golden, just like Harry Styles' song.

£85

fila.co.uk

Robert Plant

On success, critics, and what 'Stairway to Heaven' means to him now



You're from the Black Country. What's the most 'Black Country' thing about you?
The self-deflating humour. Sometimes I collide into people I knew when I was at the local town hall, and usually they're charmingly abusive. They celebrate success for 10 minutes, and then the rest of the time it's that success has gone to the wrong person or whatever. I love that.

> ***Plant and Krauss released album* Raise the Roof *last autumn to critical acclaim***

How do you define success?
By the smiles on the faces of the people I'm working with, the demeanour, my own demeanour. Entertainment is fine so long as the person you're entertaining most of all is yourself. I'm wary of repetition.

I like watching you and Alison Krauss harmonise live. How do you connect when you do that?
We kind of watch each other when we're singing. I'm still slightly impish, so I might hold one syllable a little bit long, and she hangs on with me, and she doesn't know when it's going to end. The eyebrows tell everything, like she's asking me, "Why am I doing this? Why are you fucking about like this?" It's great.

When the first Led Zeppelin album came out, some reviewers (ahem, Rolling Stone) panned it. Is there anything to learn from negative press?
Absolutely nothing. It's bullshit. Beauty's in the eye of the beholder. The guy around Rolling Stone was not very happy at all.

In Zeppelin, you often sang about sex, and some people associate Led Zeppelin with debauchery and sexism. How do you feel about that aspect of the band now?
This morning I was playing that YouTube clip of Howlin' Wolf having a showdown with Son House; it's a black-and-white clip of 'Meet Me in the Bottom'. And I'm thinking about Robert Johnson and all the artists that I listened to, whether it was Memphis Minnie, 'Me and My Chauffeur Blues', Muddy Waters, 'Got My Mojo Workin'', and it was loaded with innuendo. With rock'n'roll singers, it was almost pantomime. It was another time, and there was nothing malevolent or base; it was just part of the time.

Do you ever feel sad that the last time you appeared in public with Jimmy Page was at the 'Stairway to Heaven' trial?
I think I may have seen him once since then. As a matter of fact, I'm hoping to see him tomorrow, because I'm going to London, and I've got a really good record by Robert Finley, *Sharecropper's Son,* that I want to give him for old times' sake.

After all these years, how do you calm people down when they meet you and treat you like their idol?
I'm flattered when people are kind, but it's not the be-all and end-all. I'm a guy who got older. And the thing is, I can still do all the shit I could do before, because occasionally through these shows I let it rip for a minute. I'm a pretty public person. I mean, I don't have to go in the telephone booth to get changed and come out with no shirt on. That might be a bit risky now. But you just keep moving and take everything as it comes around the corner.

My interpretation of 'Stairway to Heaven' is you were speaking out against selfishness. Do you feel like people got the point of the song?
I have no idea; it was such a long time ago. I used to say it in Zeppelin, "This is a song of hope." I know Jimmy and the guys were really proud of the musical construction. They gave it to me and said, "What are you going to do about this?"
And so what do I think now? When I hear it in isolation, I feel overwhelmed for every single reason you could imagine. There was a mood and an air of trying to make it through. Everybody was reeling from Vietnam and the usual extra helping of corruption with politics. There were people who were really eloquent who brought it home far less pictorially and did a much better job of reaching that point. But I am what I am, and as my grandfather said, "And I can't be more am-erer." KORY GROW

ILLUSTRATION BY **Mark Summers**

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AUDEMARS PIGUET

Le Brassus

FROM ICONOCLAST TO ICON

50

Royal Oak

50th anniversary

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AP HOUSE LONDON : NEW BOND STREET